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ABSTRACT

Based on two studies, this report describes aspects of kindergarten teachers' contact with parents. The first study, which took place in Auckland (New Zealand) in 1983, looked at the way parents are introduced to kindergarten, particularly through home visiting and group pre-entry sessions. The second study was a national study designed to look at a wide range of parent-teacher contact. Sections of the report focus on: (1) the process of establishing relationships between parents and teachers; (2) parent participation; (3) teacher support for parents; (4) training and support for teachers; (5) conclusions; (6) discussion topics, including parent-teacher partnerships, the kindergarten program, parent involvement and education, and teacher-parent support; and (7) suggestions for pre-service and in-service training. Appendix 1 describes the research projects, while appendix 2 lists members of the advisory committees for the studies. Citations number 43. (RH)

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KEEPING IN TOUCH

Studies in Education Series, No. 50

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Teachers and Parents in Kindergartens

Margery Renwick

New Zealand Council
for Educational Research
Wellington
1989

New Zealand Council for Educational Research
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The Full Report

A full report of this study has already been provided for the Department of Education (*Kindergarten Teachers and Parents*, NZCER, 1988). Appendices to that report include the actual wording of questions in the questionnaires and interview schedules as well as a copy of the observation schedule. More detailed tables are also included.

Anyone interested in any of this material or further information about the study may write to:

The Families and Early Childhood Programme,
New Zealand Council for Educational Research,
P.O. Box 3237, Wellington.

Margery Renwick
Wellington, June 1989

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FOREWORD

The year 1989 marks the centenary of the free kindergarten movement in New Zealand. Even in the earliest days the 'home visit' created a link between a kindergarten teacher and a parent. Home visiting is still recognised as part of kindergarten work although its purpose has changed. This report shows how the telephone may now substitute for the home visit and that introducing a parent and child to kindergarten may be through a pre-entry group.

But home visiting is only one way in which kindergarten teachers and parents come in contact with each other today. They also meet at the door of the kindergarten, they work together when parents help during the sessions, and teachers work with parents who serve on kindergarten committees. When they meet, what do parents and kindergarten teachers talk about? What do they see as their respective roles? In this valuable study of how teachers and parents keep in touch in kindergartens we hear their own voices. Parents come with varying expectations and needs and kindergarten teachers interpret their own role in relation to parents in a variety of ways. We find that teachers and parents do not necessarily see their relationships to each other in precisely the same light.

Underlying the differences that exist in the relationship there is a division between domestic tasks and working with children, a division which helps to pattern the roles of kindergarten teacher and parent.

The current reform of the school system is bringing teachers and parents closer together. Therefore, it is illuminating to read a report which explains how the partnership works out in early childhood. It is certainly not a fixed relationship. Mostly it works well, sometimes it does not. One lesson from the research reported here is that while there may be a tradition of relationship between teacher and parent there may not be a tradition of exactly how to manage this relationship. This report provides information which can be used by teachers, by teachers in training, and by parents to improve this relationship.

Geraldine McDonald

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INTRODUCTION

Kindergarten teachers are required to spend two and a half hours a week in work with parents,[1] which includes visiting parents at home and organising group pre-entry sessions. However, kindergarten teachers have many and varied contacts with parents through having parents as helpers at sessions, during committee work and on social occasions, as well as day-to-day contact when parents deliver and collect children. Teachers claim that this contact has become more demanding and stressful as parents increasingly turn to them for support with family and personal problems.

The Kindergarten Regulations do not state the direction that the teachers' 'work with parents' should take. 'Although parent work in one form or another has been a feature of kindergartens from the earliest days . . .',[2] teachers have always been free to plan their parent work as they wish. This flexibility and lack of specific direction has led to variations from kindergarten to kindergarten and to changes over time. Underlying the teachers' practices, however, has been a common view that kindergartens are an extension of the home and that since both teachers and parents are involved in, and concerned about, the development of the child, the relationships that teachers develop with parents are important. More recently, questions have been asked about the extent to which, if at all, teachers have a responsibility to the family as a whole as well as to the child.

This is a descriptive account of some aspects of kindergarten teachers' contact with parents based on two research studies. The first project, carried out in Auckland in 1983, looked at the way parents are introduced to kindergarten, particularly through home visiting and group pre-entry sessions. Postal questionnaires were sent to kindergarten teachers and parents were interviewed. The second project was a 1985 national study designed to look at a wide range of parent-

1. See Department of Education, *The Kindergarten Regulations 1959* (Reprint) (Wellington: A.R. Shearer, Government Printer, 1973/243).

2. I. Christison, *A Survey of Preschool Educational Services in New Zealand* Unpublished MA Thesis (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 1965), p. 43.

teacher contact. The major part of the research was carried out through a nationwide postal questionnaire survey of kindergarten teachers. A small sample of parent interviews and kindergarten observations helped to flesh out the information collected from teachers. Parent-teacher relationships are complex, and we took only a snapshot view of various aspects of contact between teachers and parents. The studies were based on the assumption that parent-teacher partnership is a good thing. We did not attempt to measure whether parent-teacher contact results in any gains for parents, teachers or children. (For details about the research projects see Appendix 1.)

The longstanding allocation of two and a half hours a week in work with parents was established at a time when it was appropriate to assume that the main care-givers of young children were mothers and that they were likely to be full-time home-makers. A major form of contact with parents was the home visit. The circumstances of parents and the communities served by kindergartens have changed greatly during the last two decades. A main aim of this study was, therefore, to see what kinds of contact teachers typically have with parents nowadays, and to examine some of the issues related to practices such as home visits and parents being present during kindergarten sessions. Not surprisingly, we found variations in parents' expectations of teachers, and variations in teachers' beliefs as to what their practice should be. While parents are appreciative of the role teachers play, particularly in the care of their young children, it is clear that the rhetoric of parent-teacher partnership does not always square with the reality.

Since the research for this book was completed, dramatic changes in early childhood education have been mooted and some have taken place. We were concerned with one branch of early childhood services – kindergartens. With the introduction of integrated training courses for all those preparing to train for work in the various services of early childhood, and the articulation in the Meade report of a more holistic model for early childhood, referred to briefly at the conclusion of this book, the relationship between teachers as professionals and lay parents is likely to be a continuing focus for comment. We have attempted to describe the scene as it is now by considering current practices in the context of kindergarten teachers' stated objectives in their contact with parents. Although the material presented here is undoubtedly most relevant for kindergarten teachers and parents, the issues raised should be of interest to all parents and teachers concerned with the early years of childhood.

KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' OBJECTIVES IN THEIR CONTACT WITH PARENTS

Objective 1: *To Develop Good Relationships with Parents*

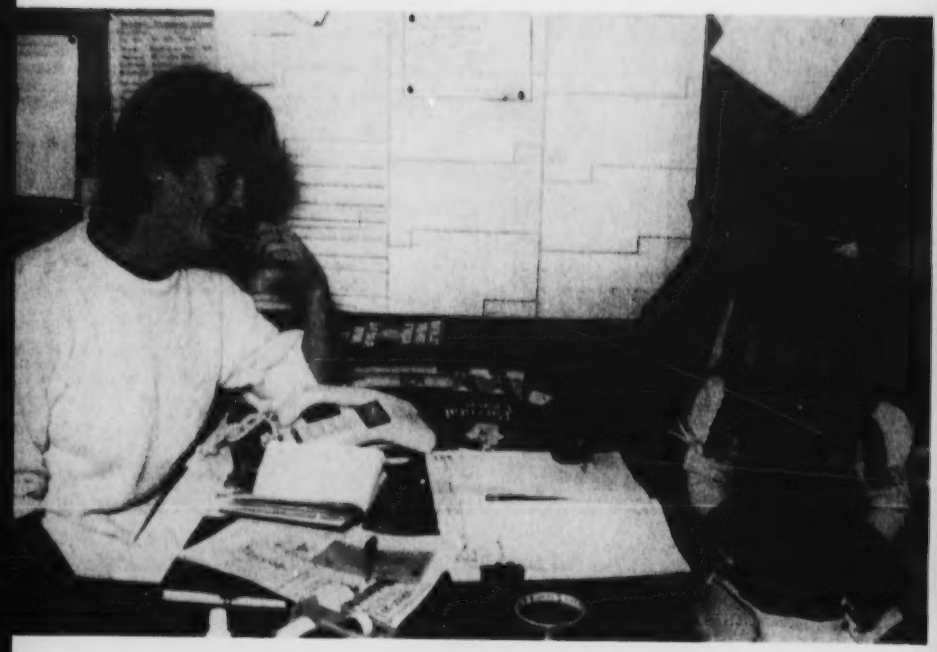
- The kindergarten teacher's personality should be warm and friendly. Parents need to develop confidence in her as a caring person.
- The kindergarten atmosphere should be welcoming and comfortable.
- Teachers should work in partnership with parents for the benefit of children.
- Parents should be valued for themselves as well as for their role in child development.
- The kindergarten should be a community centre where parents get to know each other.
- Informal contacts between teachers and parents are important.

Objective 2: *To Encourage Parents to be Involved in the Kindergarten*

- Parents as helpers during sessions.
- Parents as committee members.
- Parents taking part in social functions.

Objective 3:
To Support Parents

- In caring for their children.
- In understanding child development: parent education.
- As individuals.



Jasmine loved it and couldn't wait to start. I was pleased because she was really ready for it.

1.

FROM THE BEGINNING: ESTABLISHING PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

Kindergarten teachers stress the importance of developing good relationships with parents, and the need for parents to get to know about and be involved in the kindergarten programme. Initial contacts are important in meeting these objectives. Three ways by which parents are introduced to the kindergarten are:

i) When they put their child's name on the waiting list.

ii) If the kindergarten teacher visits them at home.

iii) If they attend a group pre-entry session.

The Waiting List

Parents are likely to put their child's name on the kindergarten waiting list at the age of two, although it will be a year or more before there is a place for their child in the afternoon session.

How do parents and children feel at this time?

- Because the value of early childhood education is generally accepted, parents are likely to feel that they have 'done the right thing', that starting kindergarten is 'a milestone', a 'positive step in getting started with pre-school education'. Putting their child's name down is the first stage in 'getting into the system'. (In fact it may not be the first stage. Children entering kindergarten are likely to have already attended a playgroup, a playcentre or creche.)
- Parents will react to the 'atmosphere' of the kindergarten, the relationship between teacher and children, and the range of activities and the way they are set out.

- Parents are likely to say that they are pleased to put their child's name on the waiting list because their child is ready for the experience:

  > Jasmine loved it and couldn't wait to start. I was pleased because she was really ready for it.
  >
  > David was really interested . . . He was keen to look around and suss out the scene.
  >
  > I enrolled John because he needed outside contact – he was too clingy.

However:

- Parents and children may be apprehensive and shy.
- Parents may anticipate their feelings of loss when their child starts kindergarten.
- The time a child has to wait after their name is put on the waiting list may be a problem. Children are often impatient and want to start straightaway:

  > We both felt great. Sandra didn't want to come away. She's a bright little button and needed something extra. Everything was there I wasn't providing at home. So vibrant and alive.
  >
  > Emma was excited. I thought 'Roll on'. It's a long time between enrolment and when they get in.

- Parents may feel that they are pressured for their child to attend kindergarten. As one mother put it:

  > I came cap in hand because I didn't enrol Meg at age two, but at age three. I felt like a beggar, apologetic and self-effacing – hoping to be let through the portals. I didn't enrol at two because at the time I was angry about pre-school procedure – suddenly at two mothers start worrying about pre-school education – feel threatened and undermined. Mothers feel they have to be doing something formal with the child – social pressure. Reflects a concern about education. You'll jeopardise a child's chances. He'll never become a doctor or a lawyer if he doesn't attend a pre-school. Later I was apologetic because I realised at three that Meg needed social contact. I still feel the pressure to get children into pre-school has increased women's feelings of insecurity.

Issues raised by parents: how can teachers help?

- For a teacher it may just be 'another parent', but for the parent it may be their first contact with a kindergarten. Their welcome is important.
- Parents and children will probably want to look around the kindergarten. They may even wish to join in:

  I didn't know what to expect. Would have liked to have been shown through. Quick and impersonal.

- A common complaint from parents is that they were not introduced to other parents.
- Teachers need checklists of items they should raise at this time, such as enrolment and admission procedures.
- Are there any activities parents could be involved in between the time they put their child's name on the waiting list and the day their child is admitted? What is a parent's reaction likely to be if the only activity she is invited to take part in is fundraising?
- If parents in the community are from different ethnic groups, have teachers discussed ways of making them welcome? Can they greet parents in their own language?
- Do parents know how the waiting list works?

  My sister-in-law told me to enrol at two. I didn't take much notice and was several months late. I realised afterwards that names came up in order.

- Parents may expect their child to start as soon as their name is on the waiting list, or automatically to start at a given age, for example, three years:

  I kept ringing to find out if it was time. Initially told three and a half but Dean was four before he started. I felt confused. I didn't know why they changed the age.

  I thought Anne would get precedence because she was older. I had to go along and hassle in the end. I didn't know when she was going to start. It became pressing to get Anne to kindergarten because I was financially depressed. The creche fees were high and it was time-consuming. I had to have hassle-free time to work.

- What is the kindergarten policy on 'transfers' from other kindergartens?

Home Visits and Group Pre-Entry Sessions

Regular kindergarten sessions for children are not held on Wednesday afternoons. Traditionally this has been the time when teachers have fulfilled the requirement for them to spend at least two-and-a-half hours a week in 'work with parents'. The Standard By-laws for Associations state that 'work with parents must include pre-entry sessions and home visits'.[3] However, our evidence suggests that not all parents will experience both activities, and some will not experience either.

Frequency of home visits: the teachers' view
(See also Tables 1 and 2)

When teachers nationally were asked to *estimate* the number of home visits *they* made the previous year, the range was very great – all the way from three teachers who said they had made only one visit, to six teachers who claimed to have made more than 100 visits. Overall, just under a third of the teachers said they had made 10 or fewer visits, just over a third said they had made between 11 and 30 visits, and just over a third said they had made between 30 and 100 visits.

The teachers were also asked whether a teacher from their kindergarten visited a child at a home *before* they attended sessions and/or *after* they had started kindergarten. If children are visited it is more likely to happen before rather than after entry. Forty-two percent of teachers said a child was 'always' or 'usually' visited before entry, compared with only 12 percent who said they 'always' or 'usually' visited after entry (although just over half said they 'sometimes' did so). However a third of the teachers said children were 'rarely' or 'never' visited either before or after entry.

Frequency of home visits: the parents' experience

Auckland: Of the 156 parents interviewed, only 35, or fewer than a quarter, had been visited before their child started kindergarten. An equal number had been visited since their child started attending sessions. (As the parents interviewed had been associated with the kindergarten for fewer than three months, this number would increase over time.)

3. New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union (Inc.), *Standard By-laws for Associations* (Dannevirke: Kelly Printing Ltd, 1978).

Frequency of Home Visits and Group Pre-entry Sessions: National Survey

Table 1 Home visits before entry

	Number of teachers	% of teachers	
Always	46	21	42
Usually	47	21	
Sometimes	56	25	
Rarely	47	21	33
Never	28	12	
	224	100	

Table 2 Home visits after entry

	Number of teachers	% of teachers	
Always	6	3	12
Usually	20	9	
Sometimes	123	55	
Rarely	65	29	33
Never	9	4	
	223	100	

Wellington: Of the 60 parents interviewed, only 20 had been visited by a kindergarten teacher at their home. These 20 parents came from eight of the 15 kindergartens. In other words, no parents from seven of the 15 kindergartens had been visited. There was only one kindergarten where all four parents interviewed had been visited at home by a teacher.

Frequency of group pre-entry sessions: the teachers' view
(See also Table 3)

The likelihood of kindergartens holding group pre-entry sessions also varies widely. Fewer than half of the kindergarten teachers, 45 percent, said that group pre-entry sessions for parents were 'always' held

at their kindergarten before a child attended sessions; 22 percent said they 'usually' were; 8 percent said they 'sometimes' were; 6 percent said they 'rarely' were; and 19 percent said they 'never' were. When asked to estimate the number of pre-entry sessions that were held for parents in their kindergarten last year, 65 teachers left the space blank, possibly indicating that no pre-entry sessions were held. Nearly half of the teachers, 47 percent, said that 10 or fewer sessions had been held; 27 percent said that between 11 and 20 had been held; 15 percent said between 21 and 30; and 11 percent more than 30. A few teachers gave very high numbers indeed, even in the 90s.

This suggests that teachers have different ideas as to what constitutes a group pre-entry session. Probably some of the latter teachers are not referring to specially organised sessions but to the practice of encouraging parents with children on the waiting list to visit with their child before entry. A few teachers who said they did not hold pre-entry sessions explained that they found such sessions less satisfactory than having new children attend regular sessions with their parent present for as long as desired.

Table 3 Group pre-entry sessions

	Number of teachers	% of teachers	
Always	101	45	67
Usually	49	22	
Sometimes	17	8	
Rarely	14	6	25
Never	41	19	
	222	100	

Frequency of group pre-entry sessions: the parents' experience

Auckland: Of the 156 parents interviewed, 110 or more than 70 percent had attended a group pre-entry session.
Wellington: Of the 60 parents interviewed, only 18 said that they had attended a pre-entry session. As with the Wellington home visits, only about half of the kindergartens were represented in the parents' figures. The 18 parents who had attended pre-entry sessions had

done so in seven of the 15 kindergartens. No parents from the other eight kindergartens had attended a pre-entry session. Although two or three parents did comment that they had never heard of such a thing as a pre-entry session, in at least six cases parents were invited to a session but did not attend because their child was already familiar with the kindergarten through older children in the family:

> By the time you get to the second child, it doesn't serve much purpose – familiar with the environment and routines.

Regional variations
(See also Tables 4-6)

The experiences of parents already quoted indicates that there are regional variations in patterns of home visiting and group pre-entry sessions. We found similar trends when we separated out the responses of kindergarten teachers in the three largest associations – Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch – from the national figures.

Home visits: In Auckland, only about a quarter of the teachers said they 'always' or 'usually' visited a child at home before entry; in Wellington the figure was just over half; while in Christchurch nearly 90 percent of teachers claimed they did so.

Why is this so? Perhaps the Christchurch Association interpreted the by-law that, 'work with parents must include home visits' as meaning that *all* parents must be visited, whereas teachers in Wellington and Auckland all visited, but did not go to all homes. There are other practical considerations. Christchurch is geographically the most compact city and, at the time of the survey, the kindergartens were zoned. The families associated with the kindergarten may have been more accessible than in Wellington and Auckland. Other explanations probably relate to the problems teachers associate with home visits; these are considered later in this section.

Two trends are evident. One is that Auckland teachers were less likely to home visit than teachers nationally, and the pattern of their visits tended to go against the national trend in that they were more likely to visit after than before entry (44 percent said they 'rarely' or 'never' visited before a child started kindergarten, compared with only 12 percent who said they 'rarely' or 'never' visited after entry). Although overall teachers in Auckland were less likely than those in Wellington or Canterbury to make home visits, teachers who did visit were not spread evenly over kindergartens; about two-thirds either

did not visit at all or visited infrequently, but the remaining third were as likely to make as many visits as Wellington and Christchurch teachers. This suggests that the enthusiasm and dedication of individual teachers is an important factor in determining the number of home visits made.

Group pre-entry sessions: Not only were teachers in Christchurch more likely than those in Wellington or Auckland to visit a child at home before entry, but they were also more likely to run a pre-entry session at the kindergarten. The percentage of teachers who said they 'always' or 'usually' held group pre-entry sessions before children start kindergarten were: Christchurch, 94 percent; Auckland, 74 percent; and Wellington, 65 percent.

Home Visits and Pre-entry Sessions: Regional Variations

Table 4 Home visits before entry

	Auckland		*Wellington*		*Christchurch*	
	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers
Always	1	3 } 24	4	15 } 53	10	59 } 8
Usually	7	21 }	10	38 }	5	29 }
Sometimes	11	32	4	15	2	12
Rarely	6	18	8	32	0	0
Never	9	26	0	0	0	0
	34	100	26	100	17	100

Table 5 Home visits after entry

	Auckland		*Wellington*		*Christchurch*	
	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers
Always	1	3 } 21	3	12 } 27	1	6 } 6
Usually	6	18 }	4	15 }	0	0 }
Sometimes	23	67	13	50	10	59
Rarely	3	9	6	23	6	25
Never	1	3	0	0	0	0
	34	100	26	100	17	100

Table 6 Group pre-entry sessions

	Auckland		*Wellington*		*Christchurch*	
	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers	Number of teachers	% of teachers
Always	19	54 } 74	10	38 } 65	10	59 } 94
Usually	7	20 }	7	27 }	6	35 }
Sometimes	5	14	1	4	1	6
Rarely	0	0	5	19	0	0
Never	4	12	3	12	0	0
	35	100	26	100	17	100

Home visits before or after entry

Because we are looking at home visits as a way of introducing parents to kindergarten, we have concentrated on home visits before entry. Parents may, however, be visited before or after entry. If a child is visited before kindergarten sessions it is likely to be an introductory visit for the child and parents. If a child is visited after entry it is likely to be for one of two reasons. By far the most common reason is that there is a 'problem', usually relating to a child's unsettled behaviour or erratic attendance. The second reason is that teachers believe parents will feel more relaxed in their company because they now know them. This may be particularly the case with Maori and Pacific Island parents where teachers say it is important not to 'go in cold' and give the impression of an 'inspection' visit. Furthermore, the teacher can suggest that they would like to visit and then wait until they are better known before confirming a time.

There is a danger, if teachers call only when there are problems, that parents will associate such visits with difficult situations. As one parent commented:

> I saw the kindergarten teacher coming up the drive and wondered what was wrong.

On the other hand, the teachers' comments also indicate a caring attitude. In many cases the kind of behaviour displayed by the child is no more than a normal reaction for a young child adjusting to a first break from home:

> I like to home visit if a child is shy and clinging during the first few sessions to reassure Mum and get to know the child on familiar territory.

Parents may also view visits after entry as a way of resolving problems:

> Tim wasn't settling. The teachers thought it would be good if he perhaps got to know them a little better by visiting at home. It really did help. He likes the teachers. They came twice.

Teachers say that parents visited after entry are invariably most interested in the development and progress of their own child, particularly his or her behaviour and relationship with other children.

Who initiates home visits?

Visits are most likely to be arranged by teachers but parents, and sometimes children, also initiate visits. If a parent invites the teacher, it is usually to celebrate a special occasion such as Christmas, a birthday or perhaps a social visit before a child starts school.

Do teachers visit singly or in pairs?

Kindergarten head teachers are about equally likely to make home visits on their own or accompanied by another teacher.

The parents we talked to in Auckland were more likely to be visited by one teacher if the visit was before entry and by two teachers if the visit was after entry. This may have been due to chance, but a possible explanation is that only one teacher is needed where home visits before entry are made only to give parents routine information about starting times. Or it may be that teachers go singly in order to cover as many families as possible. Two teachers may visit after entry because both are known to the family by then and both want the contract. Going together means that one teacher can play with the child and view his or her 'treasures', while the second teacher talks to the parent. Another explanation may be that where visits after entry are associated with problems, teachers support each other by visiting in pairs.

Time and length of home visits

Visits are usually by appointment on a Wednesday afternoon and this is the time preferred by parents. Teachers occasionally visit after hours, particularly if the mother works outside the home, or if the teacher wants to see both parents. Lack of a telephone can be a problem.

> Many of our families are not on the phone. In some cases both parents work shifts, i.e. Mum during day, Dad at night. To make contact either for a pre-entry, or for reasons of non-attendance, I need to visit during the evening or weekends.

Visits usually last for about half an hour. Teachers may stick to a fairly uniform procedure.

> I like to complete three home visits on alternate Wednesdays. Travelling time has to be allowed. Appointments are made at intervals of 45 minutes to allow adequate time for communication with a new child.

Others said the length of visit varied according to the reason for the visit, the attitude of the mother and child, the time of day and the time available to the teachers.

> The length of a visit depends upon the reason for such a visit. If it is to help sort out a problem – usually long enough to discuss over a cup of coffee. Sometimes if it is about attendance, only for about 10 minutes or so, depending on how the parents receive one on arrival.

The reception teachers receive can vary dramatically from parent to parent and from kindergarten to kindergarten.

> During the last five years I have been invited into the house only twice – all other home visits have been experiences on the doorstep, sometimes through a half-closed door.

> Sometimes we spend longer than anticipated because we are enjoying ourselves. We are even offered a bed to spend the night! If we stay longer than an hour or an hour and a half we make up time after kindergarten hours. Of course we make sure we are not inconveniencing the family in any way.

Should teachers keep records of home visits?

- Ninety percent of teachers who make home visits do keep records because:
  - i) It is association policy.
  - ii) It is a requirement of the Department of Education.
  - iii) For their own use.
- What teachers record:
  - i) Simple record that a visit took place.

ii) Fuller notes (may depend on whether the visit took place before or after entry), mostly about the child. Teachers may record family information, e.g. ethnic background, attitude towards child, home atmosphere, solo parenthood.

- Value of records:

i) Records provide background information about individual children which teachers can build on or refer back to:

> We read back and compare how the child is now compared to at the time of the home visit. We discuss what has changed, e.g. confidence, relation to us – secure and happy.

ii) Health information is particularly important. It may be used by other agencies or in an emergency:

> We refer to records constantly and check the child's progress with the public health nurse, or Plunket, or the Health Department if necessary.

iii) To keep other staff informed.

iv) Administrative and clerical uses, e.g. for filling out travel sheets:

> Survey for annual reports. Interest in comparison with intakes of other periods.

> If unable to make contact have proof you tried, because always leave a letter to say you called.

- Limitations of records:

i) Subjective nature of comments:

> Observations of home visits are personal interpretations – therefore think it best not to record them. Other things such as position in family, speech, etc., can be mentally stored or noted down on paper till dealt with.

> Only if I was going to leave the kindergarten or have a reliever in while I was absent. I don't think there should be personal things written down. You should be able to remember important things like that.

ii) Children change very quickly.

iii) Staff rarely refer to them:

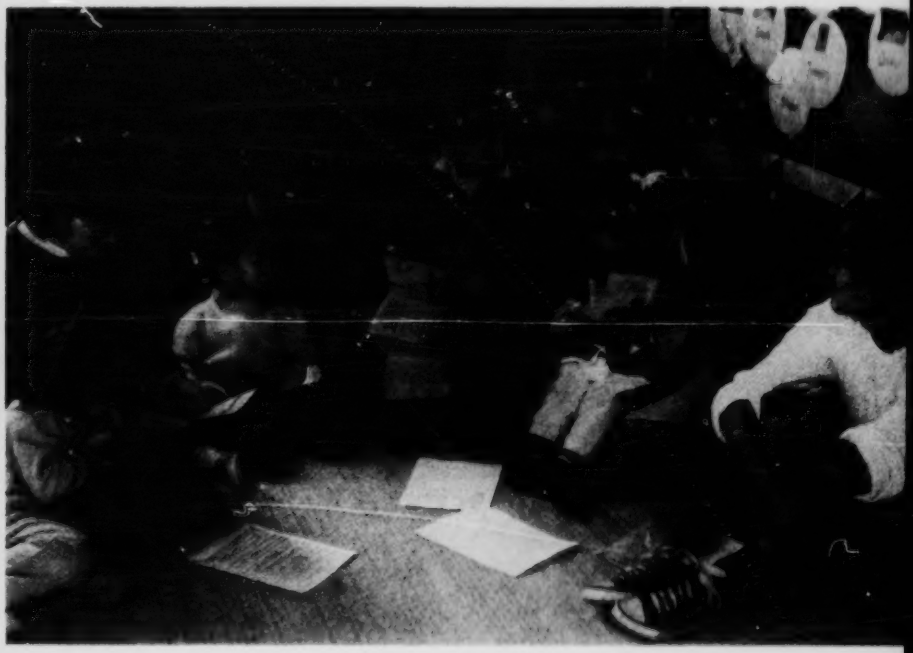
Not necessary. Situation is discussed by both teachers and action taken if necessary. Children change very quickly; what is accurate information one month can soon become inaccurate.

If there was anything really important I would remember and discuss it with my other teachers. Just a waste of time writing each visit up.

Ways of organising pre-entry sessions

The size of the pre-entry group, the length of the session and the number of sessions any parent is likely to attend vary from kindergarten to kindergarten, but parents are most likely to attend one pre-entry session of about 60 or 90 minutes in a group of five to 10 parents.

I prefer smaller sized pre-entry – both teachers can then speak individually to all present, as well as to the group.



- The number of enrolments usually determines the number of pre-entry sessions held. The most common pattern is for a pre-entry session to be arranged whenever about six to eight vacancies occur:

  As soon as I have six vacancies in pm session I organise a pre-entry session for the following Wednesday. Parents next on the waiting list are contacted to attend. Pre-entry lasts one hour and the first three children attend on the Thursday on pm roll. The second three commence pm session on the following Monday. All parents stay at pm session until child has settled.

  We organise with a view to an intake of eight to 10 children and filter them into the group usually two at a time over a period of two to three weeks, after attending two to three pre-entry sessions.

  I prefer smaller sized pre-entry – feel both teachers can then speak individually to all present, as well as to group. I work on practice of monitoring rolls and arranging pre-entry when six to eight actual or forthcoming vacancies occur. Those on phone are invited to attend. Those without phone we visit – this often means one to two weeks before date of pre-entry in order to find people home and to allow for those people who have moved and not notified us. Often have 12-14 names to find required numbers. Have tried two consecutive pre-entries afternoons.

- Other teachers hold pre-entry sessions at regular intervals:

  Every fourth Wednesday we have a pre-entry session for from five to 10 mothers.

  We usually have an organised pre-entry session approximately every six weeks, but I also encourage the parents to attend the pm session with their children as often as they are able before the child actually starts. Therefore many of our parents attend several times before being officially on the roll – although these are not claimed as pre-entry as such.

- Pre-entry sessions may be held in conjunction with home visits:

  We visit families one week and invite them to a pre-entry the following week. With a high turnover of children this is continual. I would like each child to attend two pre-entries but home visiting would not then be fitted in.

  When the movement of children into the kindergarten is staggered we home visit usually. When the movement is dramatic and groups are flowing in and out we do pre-entries.

Home visit first Wednesday; pre-entry following Wednesday; start kindergarten session two or three children at a time.

- Afternoon session is used in association with, or as a substitute for, a pre-entry session:

  At the beginning of the term when there is a large number of vacancies we hold one session on a Wednesday afternoon and then gradually bring parents and children from that session into the afternoon session. When there are few vacancies parents and children are invited to attend several pm sessions together with the pm group.

  Parents are invited to attend pm session for one hour for about four weeks before pre-entry.

Form of pre-entry sessions

- Some teachers like to make pre-entry sessions as informal as possible, arranging sessions on a one-to-one basis between individual parents and the teacher:

  We chat with each child and parent individually, explaining the whole running of the kindergarten.

- Others are more carefully planned:

  With the arrival of each, we show the child his peg and where the toilets are. Then we introduce the child to an activity. We hand out details to the parent to read through as their child is working. After half to three-quarters of an hour we sit together with the parents and go through the pamphlet with the parents, answering any questions they may have.

- Many teachers arrange group talks and also chat to parents individually, particularly when parents attend more than one pre-entry session:

  After being offered a drink and introduced to each other, we let parents and children wander about. Then when the children are settled at an activity we teachers and parents sit down and start with basics: where things are, what routines we have rostered, the programmes we have at kindergarten, the activities and philosophy. We run a second pre-entry on play and use slides for this and discuss. Then after the children have started we invite parents to come back and see slides on *Helping in the Pre-School* and discuss.

  Usually at least every child does a painting so when the painting is

completed we show the child where to hang it – then point out lockers, toilets, etc. When we greet each parent and child individually we introduce ourselves and they themselves. During the session we keep mixing and chatting, pointing out different points of interest – animals, libraries, etc. After half an hour we ask who would like afternoon tea. Then make everyone sit around a table (the children have milk and apple or play themselves). When all are seated I begin to tell the parents about kindergarten routines, committee, emphasising voluntary.

The Purpose and Value of Home Visits and Group Pre-Entry Sessions

Because of their different settings, the one taking place in a child's home and the other at a kindergarten, the home visits and group pre-entry sessions have a different focus. However, there are also aspects of the two which are similar. Teachers who both home visit and conduct pre-entry sessions believe there is value in both and tend to regard the home visit as a chance to get to know the child and family in a familiar setting before introducing them to the kindergarten environment. For others, the pre-entry session at the kindergarten has become the preferred means of introducing the child and family to kindergarten.

Benefits of home visits

Teachers and parents agree that there are three main benefits of home visits:

1. *Teachers and parents get to know each other*
- Increased confidence and trust develops.
- It is more friendly on a parent's home ground.
- There is privacy at home.
- Other family members may be present.
- The teacher gets to know the parent as a person in their own home.
- The teacher is able to show the parent she is interested in the family.

2. *The teacher gets to know the child and the child is more comfortable*
- The teacher gets to know the child in their own home.

The child usually accepts the teacher as a friend – 'You came to my house.'

- Because there are no other children around, a closer relationship can develop.
- The teacher sees the child as an individual.
- The teacher makes mental notes about how the child will fit into the programme and what kindergarten activities will be appropriate for the child.
- The child feels more comfortable about coming to kindergarten because he or she has had the chance to get to know the teacher in the security of home and has been able to show the teacher special possessions.

A genuine welcome can be given on the first day with little comments made from observations on home visits, e.g. 'How's your dog today?'

The child usually accepts the teacher as a friend – 'You came to my house.'

Parents reporting on a home visit said much of the conversation was directed towards the child. A few teachers talked about the kindergarten, describing some of the activities available, including pets, or mentioned that there would be lots of children to play with, but more commonly the conversation centred around the child at home. Teachers showed an interest in the child's room, games and pets, and perhaps read a story.

- Although some teachers said that they tried not to make judgements about a child's family and home, many teachers' comments suggested that teachers do use home visits to assess a child and his or her development, particularly in relation to the parents and the environment.

3. *The kindergarten programme*

- The home visit provides an opportunity for teachers and parents to talk about the kindergarten programme.

- Parents are interested in:
  Routine matters:
  - days and hours of attendance.
  - fees, donations and other expenses.
  - kindergarten rules.
  - what a child needs to bring.
  - suitable dress.

  The programme:
  - what will the child learn?
  - is there any formal teaching?
  - methods of discipline.

Benefits of group pre-entry sessions

The main benefits of pre-entry sessions are that:

1. *Parents and children get to know the physical layout of the kindergarten*

- Specific areas commonly referred to by teachers are the toilets, the lockers and the noticeboard.

  The first half-hour the head teacher and teacher wander around with the parents and children, showing them the entire premises.

- Many parents referred to the facilities and equipment available and were usually impressed with the range of activities and materials

and the way the kindergarten was set out.

> I was interested by the resources and the range of activities for the children: the music room, gorgeous mini-toilets, low handbasins – fantastic, mind blowing!

2. *Teachers share routine organisational matters with parents*

- Teachers claim that parents' main interest is with routine information about the running of the kindergarten:
  - days and hours of attendance and regularity of attendance.
  - appropriate clothing for kindergarten.
  - what children need to bring, the financial contribution expected of parents.
  - whether or not toddlers are welcome.

- The questions most commonly asked by parents are:
  - when will my child start?
  - when will my child move from afternoon to morning kindergarten?

3. *Teachers introduce parents to the programme for children*

- Teachers regard group pre-entry sessions as an important means of explaining to parents the kindergarten programme and philosophy.

- The small group allows teachers to talk about kindergarten activities without having to repeat the information many times over as they do on home visits.

- Teachers can talk to parents without the constant interruption of a normal session:

> A chance to explain kindergarten philosophy and programming in depth and enlist support for this.

> When chatting with parents I often reassess why and how I'm doing things in the programme.

- What the parents want to know; for parents, the most important gain from attending a pre-entry session is to find out more about the kindergarten programme and philosophy.

  Two common issues raised by parents, according to teachers, are:

  i) What children will learn. Teachers may have to justify the 'free play' philosophy and explain why the programme is not more structured. Parents may also be interested in kindergarten as a preparation for school.

ii) Discipline. Parents' questions about discipline are often about misbehaviour: What will the teacher do if a child is 'naughty'? How are aggressive children handled?

In support of the teachers' views, when parents spoke of the information they had gained from a pre-entry session, for many the main idea that had been emphasised was that children learn through play:

> The teacher stressed that children learn in a relaxed and very subtle or play way.
>
> Fascinated that the children were going to learn through play and not going to be taught.

The subject of discipline was also frequently raised, often in conjunction with the free play philosophy.

> Children learn unhampered.
>
> The children weren't strictly disciplined – the teachers were there to watch.
>
> Surprised how they discipline the children – don't smack.

5. *Teachers discuss the kindergarten administration, including the role of parents*

- Teachers use the pre-entry session to describe the kindergarten administration, particularly:
  - parent committees.
  - parent helping rosters.
  - fundraising.

Usually the head teacher explains how things work, supported in some kindergartens by a member of a parent committee:

> We talk about hours, times, donations, parent library, noticeboards, mother help committees, home visiting, etc. We also have a committee member present to encourage parents to join the committee and explain how their money is spent.

- According to teachers, although a few parents are interested in ways in which they can support the kindergarten, most at this stage are not particularly interested in what part they might play. The two most common questions are:
  'How long will I have to stay with my child?' (or, more negatively, 'How soon can I leave?')
  'How often are parents expected to help?'

6. *Teachers and parents get to know each other*

- Teachers and parents can get to know each other in a friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Parents who have already met the teachers when they visited their home now have a chance to see them in the kindergarten setting:

  Pre-entries give time to learn something of the parents, their standards, interests and expectations of children. Getting to know the parents' point of view.

  > I can meet families who were home visited by the other teachers and can strengthen the relationship with families I visited.

- A common response from parents is that teachers are friendly, welcoming, approachable and relaxed:

  I have no problems communicating with teachers at all. They've been terrific. Very ready to help.

- There were exceptions to these views:

  > I didn't know who the teachers were. They weren't around the parents and children.
  >
  > Distant attitude to parents. Could have been a lot more welcoming. Very strict about discipline and hard on the children. Could have been friendlier.
  >
  > Teacher made little positive impression. Lacked enthusiasm. Unwillingness to answer questions about kindergarten.
  >
  > Nothing startling. Just a teacher doing her job – rather distant and vague.

7. *Parents get to know each other*

Many teachers believe that the kindergarten is a 'focal point for parents':

> Our extended pre-entries encourage friendship. When inviting a mother to bring her child to pre-entry, I mention there will be other mothers and what a lovely time it is for parents to get to know each other, coming into pm sessions knowing someone else when everybody seems to know everybody.

- Ninety-six percent of teachers think that when mothers attend pre-entry sessions they begin to form friendships. Mothers do no doubt make friends through kindergarten, but they may be less likely to do so as a consequence of attending pre-entry sessions than the

teachers imagine. Only about a third of the Auckland mothers said that they had kept in touch with any of the mothers they had met at the pre-entry session, usually on a rather casual basis. Although car pooling arrangements may lead to children playing together, contact between mothers at this stage tends to be superficial:

> Just to stop and chat at kindergarten.
>
> Still haven't really met any. No personal contact.
>
> Not a meeting place for mothers. Kept friendly with one whose daughter is friendly with Cath.

- When the parents were asked if anything had disappointed them about either the pre-entry session or the teacher, the most frequently mentioned criticism was that parents had not been introduced to each other:

> Didn't know what to expect so couldn't really be disappointed but would have liked to have been introduced to the other parents or some of the other parents. Found the whole thing very formal.
>
> Parents were left for a while sitting there while children played (staff worked with the children). No one knew each other and the parents were a little shy to chat.

If the teachers believe that parents should get to know one another at pre-entry sessions, this is an important omission.

8. *Children get to know the kindergarten and teachers get to know the children*

- Children become familiar with the kindergarten environment with their parent present and without too many other children around.

> The child can look around uninhibited by 39 other pre-schoolers busily working or playing. They can experiment alone at activities. By having six to seven children they usually make 'friends' quickly without being overwhelmed.

- Teachers to get to know individual children:

> Can spend time with new children individually – learn names and gain some of their confidence.

- Teachers start to assess the child, particularly his or her ability to get on with others:

> They give us time to observe each child: useful to note the activities he is comfortable with and those that his parents steer him towards.

We can also gauge the type of child who will be starting and know to be aware of any problems.

Why teachers do not make home visits

About half of the teachers who make regular home visits say there are problems associated with home visiting. These tend to be the same as the reasons other teachers give for *not* visiting.

1. *Lack of time and staff*

- In kindergartens with a high turnover of children teachers do not have the time and staff to make visits worthwhile:

> I do not home visit as much as I would like because I do not have the time. I do not regard five minutes on the doorstep as a satisfactory home visit.
>
> The time set aside for home visiting by the association is Wednesday afternoon. Because this falls immediately after four consecutive sessions there is often pressure to attend to many urgent matters which have arisen by this stage of the week.
>
> High turnover of children makes it difficult to visit all children. With sudden influxes we hold pre-entries, and if need be, visit later in the year.

2. *Other ways of introducing parents to kindergarten are more effective*

- Teachers argue that home visits are less necessary than they used to be because contact with parents is now made in a variety of other ways.

> The main difficulty is the number of competing parent contact activities which tend to take up non-contact afternoon, e.g. in Term III 1983 I can remember the following – two parent group meetings, one parent lunch, one parent music workshop, three pre-entries, one teacher workshop (organised by senior teachers), one excursion impinging on afternoon. When I started teaching 10 years ago few of these were regarded as necessary. As I prefer both teachers to go on home visits, visiting tends to get crowded out unless really important to the child.

- Group pre-entry sessions are a more efficient use of time:

> It is not the best use of time and most parents prefer to come into the kindergarten and see what I'm talking about. I can show the lockers, fruit bowl, parent noticeboard, etc. I can see how the child will

react to kindergarten. After all, he is going to be coming to us, not us taking the kindergarten to him.

- In kindergartens where there is a playgroup teachers are well known to parents and children before children start regular sessions.
- If teachers live in the community (true of about a third of Auckland teachers) they are already well known.
- Home visits are not necessary because parents are encouraged to stay at kindergarten. As they come and go quite freely, parents quickly establish friendly contact with the teachers.

3. *Attitude of parents*

- Parents are self-conscious about being visited at home:

  Some people do feel that teachers are looking them over but if you visit everyone it generally gets around the district and is accepted. Some people think we are welfare as a lot of children at our kindergarten are under different social services.

  Some parents try to avoid us. When a time is arranged parents go out. Some parents won't let you into their homes.

  Sometimes a parent is not keen on the visit. There is still a strong stigma attached that we visit to look at the home (e.g. material possessions). Parents are not always responsive to suggestions staff make. Sometimes parent puts child down to sleep or child is away playing.

  I notice how shy and uncomfortable many young mothers are about having to entertain me – the middle-aged, middle-class, bossy teacher. Visits to mothers after friendly relationships have been established are not so fraught with nervousness by parents.

- The changing ethnic backgrounds of the families using the kindergarten, particularly in Auckland:

  Problem of communication with many families who have English as a second language or no English at all.

  To announce arrival would mean accepting tea and food as this is a cultural presentation welcome.

  Children tend to move households frequently and family situations change. With language difficulties it is hard to explain why we are visiting. Parents are often suspicious of our intentions.

One reason for fewer visits being made may be an increasing awareness of cultural differences and respect for cultural protocol. With some Pacific island peoples, for example, contact should first be made with the father rather than the mother, the parent more typically associated with the kindergarten. Furthermore it would only be appropriate for married kindergarten teachers to make home visits if accompanied by their own husband.

- Kindergarten teachers' reactions to home visits are influenced by the locality of their kindergarten. One teacher wrote:

  > At my previous kindergarten, home visits were enjoyable and social occasions. Every child was visited twice. Home visits could still be taking place at 5 or 6 at night. It established fantastic relationships. Here it's different. You are lucky to get a foot in the door. It is hard to communicate because of language. Parents tend to be suspicious of anybody 'official looking'.

- Families where both parents work outside the home.
- Shift workers may sleep during the day.
- Children may be cared for by friends or relatives, particularly grandparents who may not speak English.
- Lack of a telephone means it is difficult to make appointments.
- Teachers feeling shy and nervous.
- Having to compete with TV viewing.

Why teachers do not hold pre-entry sessions

Teachers in Auckland who did not regularly hold pre-entry sessions were asked why this was so. As most held pre-entry sessions, only about 20 teachers responded. The main reason was because they thought that the regular afternoon session when parents are welcome to stay is a better way of introducing parents to kindergarten:

> We prefer parents to come to the sessions as a visitor with their child (and stay with them) at least four times over a period of two to three weeks before they come onto the kindergarten roll. In my experience mothers don't relax well at pre-entry groups. They prefer to see in their own time how kindergarten operates and adjust slowly to that.
>
> When a new parent comes it is important to talk to that parent without interruption for at least 10 minutes. I dislike groups [pre-entry] for that

reason. Usually a pre-entry group consists of about six mothers and it is very difficult to talk in an intimate way when there are so many other new parents about. Also parents are not usually prepared to talk in a relaxed way at first meeting. They need to come a few times in a casual way to build up a trust.

If families are already known at the kindergarten, teachers may feel a special pre-entry session is not necessary:

> Pre-entry sessions are held when there are vacancies on the afternoon roll. Children who have not had any association with the kindergarten, i.e. older brother or sister attended, would be asked to attend pre-entry. Children who have recent involvement would not normally be invited to pre-entry.

Teachers see relatively few problems associated with pre-entry sessions.

- The most frequently mentioned problem is that pre-entry sessions are time-consuming, tiring and take a lot of organisation:

  > I just feel it is too tiring to talk to a group of parents after a session all morning and answer a lot of questions. Then go on to do kindergarten maintenance, etc.

- It is frustrating for teachers if invited parents do not turn up, or if those who come stay too long.

- Teachers may have difficulties deciding on the content of sessions:

  > Perhaps deciding what are the most important learnings to initiate or pass on to the parents at this stage.

  > I would like to spread the pre-entry over two sessions but have felt so far I cannot do this. Too much information for one session.

- The range of parents attending a session can lead to problems of how best to manage the group.

  > Having a mixed group of parents ethnically and socio-economically makes it difficult to aim discussion.

This is particularly so if the teacher feels the parents are uncomfortable because of their differing economic and ethnic backgrounds. Parents may feel shy and threatened.

> Welcoming as we try to be, parents are often uncomfortable with the 'teacher'/'expert' image they have of us.

- Handling individual queries from parents while talking to the group as a whole.
- Coping with both children and parents is not easy; sometimes the children cling to their mothers and are restless or chatter. As one teacher wrote:

  > When one of the staff is talking to the mothers of the children due to start it can be trying for the other staff member to supervise adequately a group of children who are experiencing the freedom of the kindergarten for the first time.

- Children misbehaving at pre-entry sessions can also be stressful for their parents.
- Pre-entry sessions may give a false impression of what kindergarten is really like:

  > The parent and child get a wrong impression about kindergarten – six to eight children, two teachers and six to eight mums all playing happily.

How Welcome do Parents Feel at Kindergarten?

If a major objective of kindergarten teachers is to develop good relationships with parents, how welcome do parents feel at kindergarten? When we interviewed the 60 parents in Wellington we asked them: *Do the kindergarten teachers give you the feeling that, as a parent, you belong to the kindergarten and that you're welcome at any time?*

The parents were asked to locate their answer on a four-point scale of 'very welcome', 'quite welcome', 'not really welcome' or 'not welcome'. Of the 60 parents, 42 (70 percent) said they felt 'very welcome'; 11 felt 'quite welcome'; six felt 'not really welcome'; and one felt 'not welcome'.

Enthusiastic parents added comments such as:

> They go out of their way to welcome me. They are very welcoming to my younger child too.

> I feel very welcome. I stay a little while in the mornings. My child is independent but I like my younger daughter to see what is going on.

> I think it helps my older daughter since we're new to the district if she sees that I look happy and know people there. She gets a little bit of a lead from me in being part of a community.

They go out of their way to welcome me.

Those parents who said they felt 'quite' rather than 'very' welcome added qualifying comments – perhaps one teacher was less welcoming than the other or the feeling of welcome varied:

Sometimes you're very welcome but sometimes they get a bit tired at the end of the week.

Not really very welcome. Depends on the day. Yes and no. Some days I feel as though I'm accepted. Some days very stand-offish. I suppose we all have those kinds of days.

One parent who answered 'quite welcome' commented:

Hard to answer really. There's a distinction here between 'belonging' and 'welcome'. Parents are welcome but the kindergarten belongs to the teachers – they're trained people. Parents are on their territory by invitation. The older teacher is fairly authoritarian – understandably so at the end of her career. Mother participation is within her orbit and under her authority too. There are a few mothers of my age (I had a senior job) a bit threatening to her. I am reasonably welcome but the kindergarten is the teacher's patch. She's the trained person. Parents are invited.

Parents who 'did not feel really welcome' felt that they were intruding and that they and their younger children were regarded as a nuisance and a liability:

I used to go early to watch but I felt shoved out as soon as I arrived. I wasn't spoken to or anything the first time I went.

Some parents acknowledged that the absence of welcome was at least partly the result of the difficulties the teacher had in working with large numbers of children and parents. Nevertheless they did not feel at ease in the kindergarten:

No, I'm not really welcome. Certainly not down there. No, I think mainly because of the sheer size of the numbers of parents – just couldn't have parents walking in all the time . . . I don't feel part of the kindergarten. My child just goes. I went on to the committee to have a sense of belonging. Even having joined, I really don't feel that much part of the place. I am more involved at the local school because I feel more welcomed, more useful. Parents don't even feel welcome when enrolling children. The actual enrolment sessions have been so unwelcoming that parents have thought 'No, this is not for me' and they've gone to another kindergarten. I think the teachers do well in the circumstances – a problem of sheer numbers. They're good teachers but they've been there so long I feel they're a wee bit stale. Also a certain sharpness – parents feel not that really welcome. But then, what does one expect from a kindergarten?

The Advantages to Mothers of a Child Going to Kindergarten

Nearly all the mothers (90 percent) we asked said there were advantages for themselves in having a child at kindergarten.

Time to themselves

By far the most common advantage is that mothers have time to themselves. When asked what the benefits were, the mothers frequently paused before answering, gave a self-conscious smile as though they had to justify their 'selfish' behaviour, and then said they enjoyed the 'free time'. Mothers spoke of their need for 'more space', of getting the child 'off their hands' or 'out of their hair', and the value for both mother and child of having a 'break from each other'. Mothers specified particular activities they were able to do without their child such as household alterations, gardening, playing tennis, a part-time job, or housework and shopping without interruptions.

> Having the mornings to myself. At first it was a bit of a shock. I enjoy it now but still look forward to his coming home.

> Time to myself. It's nice to have a bit of time – to have the break away so you're not on edge with them. Being able to get away from the house for part-time work. I enjoy being able to get out and take a bit of care of myself and meet others.

Because the mother enjoys time to herself and the child enjoys going to kindergarten there is a double spin-off. As one mother put it:

> When he comes home it's good. He tells me about kindergarten and I give him a cuddle instead of smacks. He can be a nuisance when he is at home and I get down on him and smack him. Our relationship is better with him being at kindergarten.

Their child has worthwhile experiences

The second major advantage for mothers is the satisfaction of knowing that their child is having worthwhile experiences at kindergarten. Most mothers spoke of their children making friends, becoming more independent and joining in with activities not available at home. Individual mothers spoke of the advantage for them of their child 'learning a few manners which makes it easier at home' or 'not being so bored', or knowing the child is 'getting ready for school':

Frances was ready for contact with others and for play activities, so that has made me feel good (especially as I was working for some of her first year). It was the best thing that happened to her. The kindergarten teachers were really good to her.

She was such an insecure and unhappy child and she's changed so much – in that respect it is an advantage.

Friendship

About a dozen parents referred to the new circle of friends they had made. This often came about through car pooling and was particularly important if a mother was new to the district.

I met more people – community contact. Before my first child was born I worked and I didn't know anyone in the immediate locality.

As a parent of an only child I had the opportunity to observe other children. I met several mothers although playcentre gave me more opportunity.

Comparisons with playcentre, both favourable and unfavourable, were made by mothers in answer to several questions in the interview. There is a tendency for mothers with experience of both to say they made more friends at playcentres.

Compared to playcentre, kindergarten comes off second best. There all parents knew each other. Here I go and pack up my child and I could talk to the teacher but not all the parents. Some parents are very offhand. I don't know half the parents that are there, even though I was president for a while.

Interviewers' Notes

There are six children in this family, of whom the fourth is now at kindergarten, and the lives of the parents revolve almost completely around them. The mother has had contact with kindergarten for about seven years and has had no experience of home visits during that time. She had been invited to attend

Note: Italicised sections throughout are notes made by interviewers during discussions with parents.

pre-entry sessions but had not taken advantage of the offer as she felt that her fourth child was familiar with the kindergarten because of her contacts through the older children. Because she still has a younger child at home she parent helps infrequently – perhaps twice a term – mainly because she thinks the kindergarten child appreciates her presence. Although she feels quite welcome in the kindergarten now, she felt less welcome under the previous head teacher's regime, especially when her little ones were noisy.

As an experienced mother she has few problems with her children and although she thought that she probably had picked things up unconsciously from the teacher, her primary feeling was that the teachers' attitudes and techniques reinforced her own principles about child rearing. She has not found it necessary to seek the teacher's help either for child-centred or for personal problems and had no experience of referrals. She would prefer to share problems with friends rather than kindergarten teachers unless it was an issue which directly affected the child.

The mother felt that the kindergarten was meeting her needs by providing opportunities for development and stimulation of her child and this they did very well. She did not feel that it was the role of the kindergarten to meet her personal needs though she appreciated the extra convenience of only having to look after one child at home while the other was at kinde arten. However, later, on reflection, she indicated that she would appreciate it if the kindergarten was more flexible and free in its structures and encouraged mothers to stay and participate in the programme if they wished and were able to do so. She also felt that it would be helpful especially to younger mothers or to those new in the district if the kindergarten could be used as a focus for social and community life – a warm welcoming place where young mothers could meet to have coffee, discuss problems and questions of interest. Even if three or four mothers needed and used the kindergarten in this way, she felt that it would be very worthwhile.

Her husband, who was present, has negative feelings about the kindergarten which he formed under the previous head teacher's regime. He feels the kindergarten regiments children, keeping children and parents in their proper place. (The mother was anxious that I did not need to hear his opinions of the kindergarten!)

This mother trained as a radiographer. She works part-time doing clerical work and is also doing an accounting unit (ACA). She has had contact with the kindergarten for over five years. In that time she never had a home visit from a kindergarten teacher but she attended about six pre-entry sessions with her son. She helps about every three weeks and with outings. Her second son is a somewhat difficult child and she feels that she made the problem worse

with her negative handling of him. In desperation she discussed her (she now regards it as her) problem with the kindergarten teacher and they in turn referred to a psychologist for advice. The psychologist suggested a system of positive reinforcement and this has been used both at kindergarten and home with positive results and the mother is now feeling much happier and reassured about her son's normality. However, she would not go to the teacher with a personal problem although she feels that it would be possible for others to do so. She felt that it would be particularly appropriate if it affected the child in any way.

She felt that the kindergarten was very important in the lives of young mothers isolated at home, especially for those with their first child. A shy young woman, who wished that the kindergarten had an active mothers' club to provide a focus for social and community life during the day.

This mother seemed a little unsure of her acceptance by the kindergarten teachers. She is uncomfortable about parent helping at kindergarten – anxious that she would not do anything wrong that would count against her child. She said that other mothers had told her that parents who did not parent help disadvantaged their children in the system (perhaps unconsciously but the teachers did it nevertheless!) so she helped 'as required'. She also felt quite negatively about the acceptance of the two-year-old by the teachers when she was a parent helper so that whatever she did she could not win.

With regard to kindergarten teachers noticing the individual problems of children she was doubtful. Her son had been wetting himself lately and each time she mentioned it they acted as though it was the first time they had heard about it. Further, she asked them to keep a check on his hearing to see if he was deaf but had had no feedback from them – certainly no suggestion for referral to specialists had been forthcoming. The mother also seemed surprised at the thought that kindergarten teachers might be concerned for the difficulties of parents. She felt that they were only interested in the education of the children. She thought that some teachers lacked personal experience of the problems faced by parents, especially those teachers who were straight out of training college. However she felt very positively about the opportunities that the kindergarten provided for young mothers to get to know other mothers – 'absolutely invaluable'.

Although the mother had seen the teachers providing a different sort of control and discipline for the children from her own, she did not seem to be able to pick up the techniques and use them herself but felt that in some way the teachers were just better than her. She valued the educational and social experiences provided for her child at kindergarten.

The child feels the mother is taking an interest and he can show her all the things he talks about.

2.

JOINING IN: PARENTS IN KINDERGARTEN

Kindergarten teachers say that one of their objectives is to encourage parents to be involved in the kindergarten. One way of doing this is for parents to volunteer or be rostered to help during sessions. Teachers say that they particularly enjoy working alongside parents in this way. A second way is for parents to serve on kindergarten committees.

We collected information about parents and sessional activities in each of the three aspects of the study:

i) In the national survey we asked teachers a series of questions about parents as helpers, including the advantages and disadvantages of parents helping.
ii) In the Wellington parent interviews we asked parents how often they stayed at kindergarten to help, and for any comments they had to make about parent helping.
iii) In the Christchurch and Nelson observations we observed and talked to the parents who stayed for all, or much of the session, in some cases as 'helpers', in other cases to settle their child.

Parents as Helpers

The teachers' view

All teachers believe that parent helpers are an advantage, benefiting teachers, parents and children. As one teacher put it:

i) the child feels mother is taking an interest and he can show her all the things he talks about.
ii) the mother is able to see what her child does, his stage of development compared with other children, and gives mother an opportunity to discuss problems with staff.

iii) the staff have an opportunity to build relationships with parents – lowers adult-child ratio – keeps staff on their toes.

The advantages of parent helpers

1. *Improved adult-child ratios*

This is the most important advantage, allowing for more individual and small group work. Extra activities with children are usually undertaken by the teacher but parents may also have particular skills they can contribute; for example, parents with artistic and cultural expertise or knowledge of other cultures. Many teachers mentioned the chance for children to have conversations with other adults as a particular benefit:

> Just being around is enough, having quiet conversations with children.

With extra adults present, children are easier to manage, reducing teacher stress.

2. *Parent, teacher, child relationships*

With parents helping at kindergarten everyone – parents, children and teachers – get to know others better. Parents have a chance to make friends. The children are pleased to have their parents present, thus increasing their security and pleasure at kindergarten.

3. *Parent education*

Teachers believe that through observation and by talking to teachers, parents increase their knowledge of child development particularly the value of play. By doing so they improve their own parenting skills. Often the most important gain for parents is to be reassured, and to realise that their child's 'phase' is normal.

4. *Help with routine tasks*

Teachers feel that they receive more support from parents because they begin to appreciate some of the difficulties of their job. This support may take the form of help with routine tasks. About a third of the teachers said this was the case, although the idea was sometimes put forward diffidently:

> Parents do preparation work and help in – dare I say it – cleaning.

If 'housekeeping' tasks are shared with parents, more time is left for teachers to work and talk with children. Furthermore, some parents, according to teachers, feel more comfortable when doing 'behind the scenes' work.

The disadvantages of parent helpers

All teachers believe there are advantages in having parent helpers, but only two-thirds think there are disadvantages. And even for these teachers the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

1. *Conflict over approaches and methods*
The main difficulties for teachers are parents whose views on child behaviour and discipline differ from theirs and parents who are inclined to do too much for children, particularly in directing their creative activities.

2. *Changed children's behaviour*
Although teachers believe that having parent helpers can make children easier to manage, they also believe that children's behaviour can change with parents present, particularly the behaviour of the helper's own child.

3. *Parents congregating*
Where more than one parent is present they tend to congregate. This can lead to 'gossiping' about individual children and the kindergarten. Some parents are more interested in talking among themselves than in helping the children. Extra adults can crowd small buildings.

4. *Presence of babies and toddlers*
Although teachers stress the importance of accepting babies and toddlers when parents help, as part of involving the whole family, some consider their presence to be disruptive.

5. *Organisational problems*
A good parent help system takes time and energy to organise. Problems can arise if parents who have said they will help do not turn up. There may be problems in occupying parents who are not good at taking the initiative. It can be difficult for teachers when some parents look for direction while others would prefer to choose their own activities.

Parents' comments about parent helping

When the parents interviewed were asked to comment on their experience of parent helping, their most frequent response was to describe the pleasure they had derived from helping. This was usually for one of three reasons:

They liked the chance to get to know everyone better.

i) First, they enjoyed the adult company. They liked, as one parent put it, 'the chance to get to know everyone better'.

ii) Second, they liked the chance to spend time with their own child and observe others.

iii) Third, parents value the opportunity of sharing the kindergarten experience with younger children in the family. Parent helping is an easy way to introduce younger children to kindergarten activities and routines. Although teachers may be less than happy to have toddlers at sessions, their presence was a common reason we observed for parents helping in the first place. Parents often had dual motives in offering to help; with a younger child to care for, a parent might as well help at kindergarten and occupy the younger child at the same time.

Frequency of parent help

How regularly do teachers have parent helpers at sessions, and what proportion of parents help? As with all other questions, the answers varied from kindergarten to kindergarten. Seventy percent of the teachers said they had parents helping on 'most days'; 20 percent said two or three days a week; and 5 percent said less than once a week. As for the number of parents involved, teachers' views ranged all the way from 15 who said that fewer than 10 of their parents would help at least once a term to 68 teachers who said that more than 50 of their parents would. In terms of the percentage of the parents on their roll who helped at least once a term:

- About a third of the teachers estimated that less than a third of their parents would help at least once a term;
- A third of the teachers said that for their kindergarten two-thirds helped at least this often;
- A third of the teachers said that more than two-thirds of their parents would help at least once a term.

The teachers' views were supported by the parents we interviewed. Overall 76 percent of parents said they would help at least once a term (this figure includes five who helped every week) and 24 percent said they would never help.

Why parents do not help: the teachers' view

Over 90 percent of the teachers gave at least two reasons why parents do not help. The most common reason is parents working or studying (75 percent of all teachers). The next three reasons (only mentioned half as often) were the parents' responsibilities for other family members, usually babies and toddlers; parents feeling uncomfortable in the kindergarten setting, usually because they lacked confidence coming, perhaps, from an ethnic minority group; and parents needing a break from children, along with pursuing their own interests. A smaller group, in the view of kindergarten teachers, do not regard parent helping as their responsibility and are not interested in coming.

Although the teachers gave the impression that the number of parents who help, and the frequency with which they help, are determined by the parents' circumstances and attitudes, the approach and policy of teachers is also important.

Why parents do not help: the parents' view

The parents we interviewed gave similar reasons to teachers as to why they might not help, but they gave different weighting to the various reasons. Full-time work commitments, for example, were only a constraint for two or three parents. A few parents were limited by a combination of part-time work and general busyness, but the most common reason the parents did not help was other family commitments, particularly younger children, along with household responsibilities and a general attitude that parents had other things to do with their time. Usually parents with babies and toddlers who did not help felt that their younger child's behaviour was a constraint, perhaps for themselves but more commonly because mothers felt teachers found it difficult to cope with the presence of babies and toddlers. As one mother commented:

> The teachers turn up their noses at the little ones coming.

Mothers with younger children who did not have the time or energy to parent help often felt guilty about this:

> I feel bad that I do not have time to help. With five children there is so much work to do at home. Maybe when only my youngest is at kindergarten I will help again.

A small group of mothers indicated that they preferred not to help because they found the kindergarten environment unfriendly. One parent contrasted her experiences at playcentre and kindergarten by saying:

> This kindergarten doesn't seem a friendly place to go and help. I did enjoy meeting other parents at playcentre.

Parents' attitudes towards helping may change over time. Mothers who are diffident with the first child may be confident with the second or have more time to help because there is not a toddler in tow. On the other hand, two or three mothers who have helped regularly and been on the committee mentioned that they felt that it was time for them to start developing other interests as the last child in the family approached the end of his or her kindergarten experience. As a mother we observed commented:

> I've got a bit bored with the whole scene!

Rostered or volunteered help

Most teachers say they rely on parent volunteers; about three-quarters of teachers said this was their policy compared with a quarter who roster parents. The parents we interviewed did not like to feel pressured to help and most favoured parent helping on a voluntary basis. One mother drew attention to difficulties inherent in the roster system:

> Even when I had four pre-schoolers, I felt that I had to do it. I would feel tired and stressed constantly minding them and the teachers were not understanding about that. The roster system has its weaknesses. I felt I had to come and would be stigmatised if I didn't. The committee ladies used to ring to remind me to come.

One factor, however, which restrained parents from helping was the limits placed on parents by teachers, even those who use a volunteer system, by indicating that they prefer only one or two parents per session. One parent commented:

> I help every two weeks – as often as possible. Once every two weeks, that's all you can get. It's always booked up. There are about 30 children in the sessions we attend. By the time the other mothers take advantage of their opportunities that's about all we can get. There's competition to a certain extent although some can't avail themselves of the opportunity – working mothers, breastfeeding mothers. I do it as often as the teacher can tolerate me! There is a notice on the board with available days.

In the kindergartens in which we observed, teachers often displayed a roster for parents to fill in their name when they would be available to help. There was sometimes a suggestion that parents should offer about twice a term but teachers varied in their attitude to this. Several stated that they would prefer not to have helpers at all if parents were reluctant to help. Many supported the view that it was better not to have more than one or two parents at a time.

Teachers pointed out that the roster did not necessarily reflect what happened on the day. Some parents did not like to commit themselves in advance but would just announce that they were staying. Several parents we spoke to appreciated the flexibility of parent help arrangements. It suited them to be able to stay on the spur of the moment when it fitted in with their plans. In one kindergarten where there were very few names on the roster the teacher said they had help most days – 'Somebody just stays – it's pot luck.' On days when

no one stayed for the whole session it was common for parents to arrive early to help clean up at the end.

Guidance for parent helpers

Although teachers acknowledge the need for parents to have guidance when helping, we observed that the amount of guidance and the way it is given varied from kindergarten to kindergarten.

It was common for teachers to display notices suggesting things parents might do when they help. Some of these were very detailed and attractively produced, others were limited. In one kindergarten, for example, the only visible instructions for parent helpers were instructions about how to label children's paintings and a suggestion not to ask children, 'What is that?' In other kindergartens they had complete checklists for parent helpers.

We talked to some of the parents about how they knew what to do when they helped. A good deal depended on how long parents had had children at the kindergarten. One or two referred to general guidance they had received when they attended a pre-entry session; others said it was 'All pretty obvious – just help out and clean up at the end'. More commonly it was trial and error. Parents had usually had one or two pointers, observed others and now felt they knew what to do. Two or three parents said they felt they knew what to do because of experiences they had had elsewhere. For example, one parent said she knew what to do because she had previously been a parent at playcentre, a second because she had been a primary school teacher. There were also several ex-kindergarten teachers among the parent helpers.

When we interviewed parents, a number reported feeling uncomfortable and anxious about parent helping. As one mother said:

> I feel superfluous when helping and nervous of the teacher's opinion of me.

One reason for feeling lost was a lack of guidance and direction so that parents felt they were not helping effectively.

The question of guidance frequently revolves around the issue of whether parents should spend most time with children or doing domestic chores. As we have already seen, teachers are likely to regard parents helping with domestic chores as less important then working with children, but evidence from our observations indicates that parent helpers spent more time on domestic tasks than child-

centred activities. It was not easy to tell whether this was what the parents preferred. One parent, for example, said she was not sure what to do and as there were no suggested duties she tended to concentrate on cleaning up and attending to the preparation of morning tea. Other parents indicated that helping with chores was concrete and straightforward and that by helping in this way, they left the teachers free to devote their time to the children.

The parents who were most enthusiastic about helping were usually those who spent time with children:

> I would rather be working and relating to children than doing housekeeping chores. I feel I am doing it for the children's benefit. It also helps to see what your child is doing rather than being shut away.

Nevertheless, there were a number of parents whose expectations of the role of parent helper did not match what they felt the teachers required of them. Some accepted this philosophically, as did the mother who said:

> I had thought I'd like to work with the children but perhaps in a way it's a good thing. Kindergarten teaching does require professional training and I'm not professionally trained so perhaps it's better that they do these activities with the children, so I'm not complaining. It's just different to what I expected it to be.

Another mother stated:

> When I help it tends to be things like cutting up cardboard. I'd rather work with the children. I haven't felt very useful. I imagined you sat there and read stories to the children but it's, 'Can you cut up some of this paper and put it in ice cream containers for next week', or cut up covers using a guillotine! – those sort of things. But then you are helping the teachers rather than the children. That's obviously the way they want it.

Parents at Kindergarten Sessions

Observers in the 20 Christchurch kindergartens recorded data taken at 10-minute intervals between 9.30 and 11.30 am and between 1.30 and 2.30 pm. They noted how many parents were present, regardless of whether they could be described as helpers, noting who the parents were with, who they were talking to and what they were doing. Because parents come and go during kindergarten sessions, staying for

varying lengths of time, it is difficult to decide who are 'helpers' and who are not. We took helpers to be parents, almost invariably mothers, who had made a commitment to stay for a full session to assist in the programme. In fact, the mothers who stayed for this reason frequently stayed for other reasons as well, and other mothers who stayed primarily to settle their children also helped, particularly with the cleaning and tidying.

The number of parents present

The number of parents present in the morning sessions in the Christchurch kindergartens varied. In one kindergarten, for example, there were no parents present between 9.30 and 11.30 am; in another kindergarten there were 10 parents present overall at different stages of the two-hour period. However, the range of parents present over the 260 observations in the morning and the 84 observations in the afternoon presented a fairly consistent pattern, as can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7 Number of parents during observation cycles

Number of parents	Number of cycles		Percentages			
	am	pm	am		pm	
0	58	0	22		0	
1	104	28	40	87	33	67
2	65	29	25		34	
3	22	15	8		18	
4	9	12	3	12	14	32
5	2		1		0	
Total	260	84	99		99	

In the morning sessions 87 percent of the observations had two parents or fewer present in the kindergarten. The most common number present at any one time was one (104 observations). In at least three kindergartens there were no parents we would describe as designated helpers during the morning observations. In four kindergartens there were two helpers and in the rest one.

In the afternoon, the overall number of parents present during the hour of observation varied less than in the morning and ranged from one parent in one kindergarten to four parents in six kindergartens. In

67 percent of the observations one or two parents were present, and in 32 percent three or four parents were present.

Who the parents were with

The observers recorded at 10-minute intervals who the parents were with – that is, children, parents, teachers or by themselves. Parents were sometimes with more than one person so the categories of people recorded were not mutually exclusive. Table 8 summarises who the parents were with during the observation cycles.

Table 8 Who the parents were with during observation cycles

	Percentage of am observations		Percentage of pm observations	
Children	53		61	
Teachers	17		16	
Parents	12	33	23	41
Others	4		2	
Alone	25		17	

Percentages total more than 100 as multiple observations were made on those occasions when parents were with more than one category of people.

For 53 percent of the morning observations (61 percent in the afternoon), parents were with children in various groups; for 33 percent (41 percent in the afternoons), they were with adults; and for 25 percent (17 percent in the afternoons), they were alone. Of the time parents spent with children in the mornings, in 26 percent of the observations they were with their own kindergarten child, in 33 percent other kindergarten children were present, and in 12 percent their own younger child was present. A similar pattern emerged in the afternoon, though there was also a trend for parents to spend more time with their own younger children.

Parents spent more time with other adults in the afternoon than in the morning. Although the amount of time spent with teachers remained relatively constant between morning and afternoon, parents were more likely to be alone with teachers in the morning sessions (12 percent of the observations) than in the afternoons (9 percent of the observations). Parents were considerably more likely to spend time with other parents in the afternoon than in the morning (23 percent of

observations compared with 12 percent). Conversely, afternoon parents were less likely to spend time alone (17 percent of observations compared with 25 percent). An explanation for this is that morning parents were more likely to be occupied alone with domestic tasks.

Who the parents talked to

Table 9 shows who the parents talked to during the observation cycle.

Table 9 Who the parents talked to during observation cycles

	Percentage of am observations		Percentage of pm observations	
Children	38		37	
Teachers	14		13	
Parents	10	29	21	36
Others	5		2	
Not talking	35		32	

Percentages total more than 100 as multiple observations were made on those occasions when parents were with more than one category of people.

In the morning observations parents spent 38 percent of their time talking with children, 29 percent of their time talking with adults and 35 percent of the time not talking. About half of the time spent in conversation with adults was with teachers. Parents were more likely to talk with the head teacher alone than with the assistant teacher. In the afternoons, although parents spent about the same amount of time talking with children, they spent more time talking with adults, particularly other parents (21 percent compared with 10 percent in the mornings). We saw earlier (Table 8) that parents spent more time with children than with adults. However, they spent proportionately less time (about 70 percent in the mornings and about 60 percent in the afternoons) talking with them.

In contrast, parents were likely to spend about 80 percent of the time they spent with teachers and parents in conversation.

What the parents did

For observational purposes, the activities parents engaged in were divided into four categories:

i) Child-centred activities.

ii) Adult-centred activities.

iii) Active observation.

iv) Non-involvement.

A list of likely child-centred and adult-centred activities had been prepared during pilot visits in Wellington kindergartens. Table 10 summarises the way in which parents spent their time during morning and afternoon sessions.

Table 10 What the parents did during observation cycles

What the parents did	Percentages of am observations	Percentages of pm observations
Child-centred activities	29	31
Adult-centred activities	33	18
Active observation	20	23
Non-involvement	21	28

Percentages total more than 100 percent because parents were engaged in multiple activities.

Child-centred activities: Parents spent 29 percent of their time in child-centred activities in the morning and 31 percent in the afternoon. In the morning the three child-centred activities parents engaged in most frequently were reading stories, pasting and playing with dough. Gymnastics was also popular in the morning and even more so in the afternoon, perhaps influenced by the fine weather during the week of observation. The equipment available at the kindergarten was also unlikely to be available at home.

Activities such as cooking, music and dance could only be chosen as an activity if they were offered on a particular day. Parents seemed happy to become involved in these activities when they arose on the programme but this only happened on two or three occasions. The children's activities where parents were least likely to be actively involved were crayons (which probably had little novelty value for either children or parents), creative play associated with dressing up, the family corner and the sandpit.

In the afternoon the activities parents engaged in, in order of popularity, were dough, the gym equipment, paintings, puzzles, pasting,

woodwork and the sandpit. The usual pattern in the afternoon was for the child to select an activity and for the mother to stay nearby. Although reading stories with children had been one of the most popular activities in the morning, it was near the bottom of the list for afternoon activities.

Adult-centred activities: Parents spent a third of their time in the morning doing adult-centred activities. As was shown earlier, parents tended to spend more time alone during the morning as compared with the afternoon sessions (see Table 8). This was associated with an increase in the time spent in adult-centred parent helping activities. Observers recorded this information for all parents, not just those designated as helpers. This explains why, even though overall parents spent more time with children than with adults, 'helpers' spent so much time doing domestic chores. Almost half of all the morning adult-centred activities (about three times more than any single activity observed in the morning) consisted of parents cleaning and tidying up. About a third of the adult-centred observations in the morning were of parents preparing morning tea, having morning tea or cleaning up afterwards. A relatively small number of parents helped with the preparation of materials, repairing and moving equipment, and administrative work, such as donations.

In the afternoon, parents were engaged in adult-centred activities for only about 18 percent of the observations. Nearly half of this time was spent helping with the preparation of afternoon tea and washing dishes. Parents also helped with cleaning and tidying and the preparation of materials for the kindergarten programme. The relatively small proportion of time parents spent engaged in 'adult activities' reflects the amount of time parents spent with their children.

It will be seen from Table 10 that parents spent considerable amounts of time in ways we described as 'active observation' (20 percent in the morning and 23 percent in the afternoon); and 'non-involvement' (21 percent in the morning and 28 percent in the afternoon). By active observation we meant parents taking an interest in a child's activities from the sideline but not actually joining in. Non-involvement was just that – by themselves, not showing any particular interest in kindergarten activities. The fact that parents were more likely to be non-involved in the afternoon than in the morning probably reflects the parents' 'newness' to the kindergarten and uncertainty about *how* to be involved.

About a third of the adult-centred observations in the morning were of parents preparing morning tea, having morning tea or cleaning up afterwards.

Parent Committees

The role of parent committees was not a major topic of the study but teachers in the national survey were asked to list up to three contributions the parent committee makes to their kindergarten.[4] They were also asked if they had any problems with their committee, and if so, what these were. The teachers were much more likely to stress the value of committees than they were the problems associated with them. All who responded said their committee made major contributions to the kindergarten.

Contributions made by parent committees

1. *Fundraising and finances*

- Parent committees contribute most, in the view of teachers, by fundraising. Almost all the teachers referred to this fact and nearly two-thirds listed it as the most important contribution.
- Fundraising events tend to have a twofold purpose:
  i) To provide a social focus for the kindergarten.
  ii) To raise money to buy equipment.

2. *Kindergarten maintenance and repairs*

- Most kindergarten committees accept a responsibility for kindergarten maintenance and repairs.
- The way this responsibility is carried out is influenced by the time and money available to the committee.
- Although some kindergartens employ groundsmen as well as cleaners, it is more common for the committee to maintain at least the grounds themselves:

  Parents take care of the grounds in working bees, pruning shrubs, etc.

- Teachers are appreciative of the efforts some committees make to upgrade kindergarten facilities:

4. According to the *Standard By-laws for Kindergarten Associations* (1978): 'Local Free Kindergarten Committees are responsible to their Associations for the control of the affairs of their kindergartens including fund raising, control of expenditure, maintenance of buildings, grounds and equipment and shall support the teachers, co-operate with them in the furtherance of parental participation and the running of the kindergarten.'

The parent committee shares in the development of the outdoor area; the bark chips under swings, and a hill, the removal of unsafe equipment and the development of a quiet area.

- Working bees may also be organised for the repair and maintenance of equipment:

  They organise working bees for doing jobs that teachers don't ordinarily have time to do, e.g. painting the dolls' corner and furniture, making dress-up clothes, etc.

3. *Social events*

- About a third of the teachers referred to the role of the parents' committee in organising social events.

- The part committees play in organising social events varies from kindergarten to kindergarten. In one kindergarten the teacher said the committee organised 'one or two social events a year'. In others, a wide range of social activities for parents and families were recorded: picnics, barbecues, fathers running huis and trikathons for families, lunches, Guy Fawkes, Christmas and mid-winter parties for adults.

- Quite a few teachers also mentioned that their parent committees took on a caring role among kindergarten mothers in times of need:

  The committee provides support to other parents involved at kindergarten, e.g. baking for new mothers, visiting sick members at home and in hospital and providing transport for those in need.

- Committee members may help new families settle into a neighbourhood and make friends.

4. *Sessional support: kindergarten organisation: parent education*

- Committee members tend to be parents most likely to help regularly at sessions:

  Committee members are very supportive during session time as parent help – they often establish good relationships with children and good contact with parents.

- In many kindergartens, the parent committee supports the teachers in all aspects of organisation and administration. This is greatly appreciated by the teachers:

  They take on the responsibility of the smooth running of the kindergarten in all aspects not related to teaching.

Examples of tasks undertaken by parent committees are to:

- Organise and supervise pre-entry playgroups.
- Prepare talks and lead discussions with new kindergarten parents at pre-entry groups.
- Take responsibility for sending out newsletters.
- Answer kindergarten mail.
- Organise films and speakers for parent evenings on both educational and recreational subjects.

Committee members can give 'moral support' to teachers. One teacher wrote of her appreciation at 'being able to call on the committee members in emergency situations', and yet another commented that 'they act as backup for teachers when problems arise'. Another recognised that parent committees 'help to generate interest and enthusiasm in the kindergarten', and occasionally 'gave feedback' about a teacher's performance.

Problems associated with parent committees

Although rather more than half of the teachers (59 percent) said there were problems, they usually only mentioned one. The range of problems with committees referred to by teachers was the same regardless of association, but Canterbury teachers were the least likely to believe they had problems with committees – only half the teachers compared with two-thirds in Wellington and in Auckland.

Two problems dominate the list:

1. *Professional boundaries*

- Problems can arise if the boundaries of responsibility between teachers and the parent committee are not clearly defined and accepted. As one teacher commented:

  > When parents go on the committee they often develop 'power' complexes and see their role as telling the teacher what to do.

- The main area of difficulty identified by teachers is for parents not to encroach on the professional responsibilities of the teacher, particularly decisions to do with the running of the sessional programme. Many teachers consult with and appreciate feedback from the parent committee, but members sometimes overstep this role:

> The committee members feel that they have the right to recommend changes in the kindergarten programme or the layout of the furniture.

- Professional responsibility, the teachers' accountability to the parent committee, and the committee's responsibility to pass on parent views about the kindergarten programme to the teachers are sensitive subjects and a source of tension in some kindergartens.

- Tension may focus on the use of resources and funds. In the teachers' view, parents' lack of understanding of the basic principles of early childhood education may make it difficult for teachers to persuade parent committees to spend funds appropriately. Hard earned money may not be most effectively used to benefit children. One teacher commented that their parent committee was:

> Monument building instead of looking to the requirements of the children.

A determined committee can override the professional advice of the teacher, or spend money without consulting the teachers.

- Parents may not recognise the boundaries between a professional and personal relationship with teachers and be 'inquisitive' about a teacher's private life.

- Parents may not observe the right of all children and parents to confidentiality about their private affairs.

2. *Lack of parent commitment and expertise*

- Parent committees may not be effective because of problems of recruiting members.[5] One teacher linked this to economic and social pressures on parents:

> The increasing burdens outside the home and family weaken commitment to voluntary work and decrease the number of volunteers.

5. Awareness of lack of parental commitment to work on committees is not new. Meade, for example, in commenting that 'only some parents have the characteristics of volunteer organisation joiners', remarked that, 'The pattern of only a small proportion of parents serving on the local committee reflects a common pattern for community participation'. She went on to say: 'Kindergarten volunteers do not seem to understand that many parents with children attending kindergarten will have neither the social participation skills nor the motivation to join a kindergarten committee'. A.E. Meade, *Public Participation in New Zealand Pre-School Education*, Occasional Papers in Sociology and Social Work, No. 4 (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington, 1981). p. 92

Difficulties in finding volunteers for the parent committee are not confined to the urban areas. Another teacher wrote:

> Because we are a small rural community, our parents are usually involved in quite a number of other committees – service clubs, sports clubs, school committees, etc., and are often reluctant to become involved in another. Therefore we have a great deal of trouble getting numbers.

Parents may be reluctant to serve on parent committees because they feel they lack the necessary skills and knowledge to be effective members. The position of treasurer is particularly difficult to fill.

- Friction among parents on the committee can be a problem.
- Teachers may feel that they are expected to take on more than their proper role in providing leadership and support to the parent committee. Many teachers would agree with the one who said:

  > A few people do all the work while others just talk without achieving anything.

- Teachers also complain of the length of time it takes committees to get jobs done, if at all.

The role of parent committees

The role of parent committees was a topic that arose in conversation, particularly in the kindergartens in which we observed. Comments from parents tended to support the views expressed by teachers in the national survey. For example, several committee members we spoke to said they spent more time at the kindergarten than non-committee mothers, and that other parents were often reluctant to accept extra responsibilities. Committee members had to spend a lot of time and energy on keeping things going. Parents, they said, 'did not turn up for work things, but did for social functions like lunches'.

It seems likely that parents who serve on committees get to know the teacher better than other parents. We noted several instances where committee members, as well as helping with sessional activities, did committee work during the session, for example, work on donations. Such activities usually led to conversation with staff. There were two or three instances of committee members retaining a link with the kindergarten after their child had left. For example, in one kindergarten an ex-committee member whose child had just started school arrived with a secondhand cash register. She had just seen it at

a sale and knew the kindergarten would like it.

One or two teachers had critical comments to make about committee members, particularly those who are tight-fisted with money. One teacher gave an example of a committee who were reluctant to spend any money because they were determined to finish the year with as much money as they started with.

It would be interesting to know if parents who serve on committees tend to be those who have had a professional training. Although at least one kindergarten teacher who was asked this question said that the committee members at her kindergarten represented a cross-section of the parents, we were struck by the number of committee members who said they had been teachers (sometimes kindergarten teachers), nurses and other professionals.

Fathers and Kindergarten

Since women tend to be the main care-givers of young children in our community, most of the information we collected was about mothers and their contact with the kindergarten.[6] We believe, however, that more fathers are becoming involved in the lives of their young children. Are kindergartens reflecting this changing social pattern? Nearly all the teachers, 91 percent, said they made a special effort to involve fathers, usually through special sessions on a Saturday morning or in the early evening. A regular programme is usually run but special activities may be planned for fathers to share with their children. An early evening meal may be prepared.

A number of teachers noted that not all children live with their fathers. For this reason, they have moved away from sessions for

6. Not that fathers in kindergarten are a new development. Dempster, writing about Rachel Reynolds kindergarten in 1916, noted the development of 'a very enthusiastic fathers' club from the beginning active and social in purpose rather than educative. As well as meeting monthly to make toys for the kindergarten and for sales of work, the men gave up much of their spare time to help maintain the building and establish and keep the gardens and lawns. Over the years fathers had come to play an ever increasing role in kindergarten life. Many instances of their interest and involvement are on record – from the cabman's outing to Ocean Beach and the valuable "collection of minerals and natural curiosities, all nicely catalogued" given by a father out of gratitude for the care bestowed on his child, to those fathers' meetings at RS Reynolds. The fatherless waif so common in the days when kindergartens had been imposed upon the community had now all but disappeared'. D. Dempster, *From Patronage to Parent Participation – the Development of the Dunedin Free Kindergarten Association, 1889-1939* (University of Otago: 1986).

fathers to special occasions for the whole family:

> At first we had fathers' evenings but they were very stiff and awkward. We found fathers more relaxed in the kindergarten environment with the support of the family. We now run Family Day, which includes all members of the family. This has proved to be a far better introduction to a so-called 'female preserve'.

> We have an early evening kindergarten session once each summer, 5-6.30 pm, especially for 'fathers and friends'. Many children do not have fathers so this is low key. Grandfathers, uncles and other relations and friends are invited.

Many of the kindergarten teachers said that they attempt to include fathers in all kindergarten activities, not just special occasions. They always refer to 'parents' rather than 'mother', and make a point of mentioning fathers specifically in any invitations and newsletters. Other teachers say they make a point of greeting fathers when they deliver or collect children and include them in conversations with children.

A number of teachers said they encourage fathers to parent help. Changes in work patterns, shift work and even unemployment have meant that some fathers are more readily available:

> We have several 'high profile' fathers on shift work who are regularly involved with parent helping and encourage others to be involved.

> If a father is unemployed we ask him to help at the kindergarten. Many children enjoy this. It is very good in our area because many children have only one parent.

A few teachers also gave examples of how they have been able to make use of a father's occupation or hobby to enrich the kindergarten programme – a policeman, a carpenter, a printer and a bee keeper had been invited to talk about their jobs.

For fathers who work during the day, attending evening committee meetings is easier than daytime sessional activities. Teachers also encourage fathers to participate in the life of the kindergarten by using them in the more traditional masculine roles where strength and construction skills are needed.

> We tune in and encourage them to participate in activities that we need muscle power for.

Fathers are approached to take part in working bees, painting and mending equipment both inside and around the kindergarten grounds.

A number of teachers said they encourage fathers to parent help.

Interviewers' Notes

This mother had five children under four after giving birth to two sets of twins, the youngest of whom are now at kindergarten. A lively, energetic woman, she has found it necessary to be strict and down to earth with her children to enable her to cope. She had no experience of home visits but had taken the twins to several pre-entry sessions which were useful as they enabled her to settle them into staying and behaving without her.

She did not enjoy parent helping but did so out of a sense of duty. She objected to the rigidity of the roster system especially for mothers under stress coping with other pre-school children. She felt that she had to parent help since the committee ladies used to ring to remind her to do it. The teachers, too, she felt, did not understand how stressful it was parent helping and coping with smaller children and babies and tended to be disapproving when they were disruptive. She also felt resentment at having to do domestic chores at kindergarten when she should be doing her own at home. Despite these gripes, she now felt very welcome in the kindergarten and that the children were developing well through their kindergarten education. She had never needed to talk to the teachers about anything more than minor matters but felt reassured about the normality of her children when she did so.

Although she would prefer to talk over problems with friends, she thought that one could share personal problems with these teachers and that some young women might indeed need their support. Important factors relating to the ability to do this were age and experience of the teachers. However, she did feel that if a problem was child-related or affecting the child, a parent should mention it to the teacher. She had had, however, no experience of referrals by the kindergarten teachers, nor any experience of parent education through the kindergarten.

She felt very strongly about the question of kindergarten finance raising. Despite the fact that it is supposed to be a free system, she found the pressure to contribute heavy and difficult to meet. She had been expected to contribute $10 a week with twins ($1 a session per child) and felt embarrassed and stigmatised if she did not pay the expected amount. (With the second set of twins the system seems to have changed and only $5 is being asked for.) However, she still felt that the 'voluntary' contribution was compulsory.

This mother liked the low cost aspect of kindergarten – available to all. She appreciated the sharing of fruit for morning tea and parents providing what they can manage. She was a very well read person, especially interested in New Zealand literature. She is toying with the idea of sending her second child to a Kohanga Reo but wanted to make sure it was not likely to lead to divisiveness between Maori and Pakeha.

She felt the kindergarten had freed her up and given her more insights into children's growth and development so that she does not mind having toys around the living room, etc.

A rather shy mother, conscious of her relative lack of education. She said several times, 'I don't think I'm being much help.' She did not have a great deal to say and gave the impression of just accepting what the kindergarten offered

her child. She is not closely involved as a parent, but not unhappy about that. The interview was conducted through TV with the child viewing. The teachers later told me how anxious 'his mother had been about the prospect of being interviewed, although, as the teachers said, 'She's a wonderful little mother.'

A very quietly spoken shy mother who did the ironing while I spoke to her (even the singlets!) She is moving to Hastings next week so yet another mobile family. She is generally accepting of kindergarten – their purpose is for the child; the child is happy therefore everything is OK. She does not give the impression that she expects much for herself except for a little free time. She is not closely involved and kindergarten is not where she has her friends. They mostly belong to her church. The teacher is friendly but she would not look to her for support other than in understanding the family's religious beliefs.

This was a bright, competent young mother, friendly and at ease both with me and with her children while I was interviewing her. She had been secretary for the kindergarten during the time that her eldest child was at kindergarten. She felt that at that time the contact with the teachers had been very important in helping her not only to understand her child, and reassure her that his behaviour and development were normal, but had also provided her with an important point of social contact with other mothers coping with similar difficulties, e.g. the isolation of suburbia and the pressure of full-time care of a preschool child. She believed that the kindergarten teachers are the first point of contact for many young and inexperienced mothers seeking help. In fact she had referred many mothers to them herself, certain that the teachers would ensure confidentiality and a listening ear, things that sometimes are all that is needed. She was, however , sometimes disappointed in the quality and nature of advice offered to mothers with difficulties. She felt that some teachers, especially the unmarried and most particularly the young unmarried, had limited experience. She also felt that to a large extent the problems of isolation and suburban neurosis suffered by many young mothers were solved by kindergartens in which the teachers were warm and friendly and encouraged the mothers to use it as a focus for meeting their own social needs. This woman felt that her previous need for the social contacts had changed now that her youngest child was at morning kindergarten and she was free to develop other interests. Consequently her ties and commitment to the kindergarten had lessened.

3.

BEING THERE: TEACHERS' SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Kindergarten teachers believe they have a responsibility to support parents both as individuals and in their role as parents. Part of their responsibility lies in increasing parents' understanding of child development and demonstrating the ways in which the kindergarten programme facilitates children's development.

Parent Education

Teachers emphasise their belief in the importance of the parental role in the early years. Although prime responsibility for a child's development rests with the parents, most kindergarten teachers believe they have a 'parent education' role, helping to 'educate parents in early education and child rearing'. Some teachers specified particular areas where they tried to help parents' understanding of their child's development in language, or science and early maths skills. Several said that they took time to explain activities to parents as a means of encouraging them to provide similar, stimulating activities at home. One teacher wrote:

> At pre-school level the parents play a major part in the learning process so it is to our advantage that the parents can carry on what is being learnt at kindergarten at home.

A major concern of teachers in the kindergarten setting is to help parents to see their child as a member of a group, to observe how he or she mixes with others and to learn that little problems in behaviour are a normal part of growing up.

The parents' view

When we interviewed the parents in Wellington we asked the question: *What sort of things would you say you have found out about the way*

children behave or learn, by having a child at kindergarten? We also asked them what was the main way they had acquired this knowledge – by observing children, from workshops, by talking to teachers, by talking to parents, or in quite other ways.

Many parents hesitated before they volunteered a comment, giving the impression that this was not something they had thought about much, or said they found it difficult to isolate ideas they might have picked up from kindergarten compared with elsewhere. This was particularly the case with parents who had older children. As two parents commented:

> I'm sure there are things but I can't really put my finger on them.
>
> I don't know if I've learnt anything really because I already have two older children.

In answering the question, many parents focused on what their child enjoyed doing at kindergarten – playing with other children their own age, dressing up, painting, jigsaws and growing awareness of books were some activities mentioned. Others commented on changes in their child's behaviour as a result of attending kindergarten, for example:

> She's a lot easier to handle since she's been at kindergarten, considering she's got a determined mind of her own.
>
> Hard to say. No, not really. She's been a lot better since she's been going. She's friendlier, mixes with other children.

Two parents particularly interested in child development commented:

> Lots! It's the big amazing thing how grossly I've underestimated the pre-schoolers. Their ability to learn – phenomenal, extraordinary! The pre-schoolers' ability to 'give it a go' compared to primary – the interest is greater – very keen. (This parent was a post-primary school teacher.)
>
> Child development is different from what I previously thought. A child's reasoning is different. They are still ahead of what I originally thought. This was brought to mind by observing at kindergarten, for example, watching the way children attacked jigsaw puzzles.

Other parents, commenting on characteristics of the age group, referred to children's relatively short attention and concentration span, their absorption in imaginative play and their developing social skills.

Observing how children react to each other, influence each other, and how their own child fits in with the social group were recurring

themes in parents' comments. A number said their child was more independent since beginning kindergarten and had learnt to take turns and share. Several parents said they were more conscious of the different stages young children go through, but were also made more aware of individual differences and different rates of development. Many parents took comfort from observing other children's behaviour and were reassured that their own child's behaviour, particularly behaviour they found difficult to accept, was typical of the age group. As one parent put it:

> That I have a normal child and that it's normal for children to be horrible at times.

A few parents felt their child had picked up negative behaviours from other kindergarten children – more boisterous behaviour, 'cheekiness' and 'bad language'. The early stages of peer pressure caused some parents concern.

Several parents reported that by observing the kindergarten programme or by listening to the children talking they had picked up interesting activities for the children to do at home. As one mother said:

> We learnt a lot of songs together. When she comes home she shows me things she's done at kindergarten. It gives me ideas.

How parents found out what they knew

When the parents were asked how they had found out what they had about the way children behave and learn through having a child at kindergarten, their response was quite clear – largely by observing children themselves. A parent's observation might include noting the way teachers handled children, particularly with regard to behaviour and discipline:

> I find it interesting to see how they deal with children who, you know, are biting. I see how she [the teacher] disciplines them without smacking. It might not be the way you do it at home, but you can pick up a lot about how to do it at kindy.

> Watching how the teachers keep control without yelling – they're very gentle, kind and quiet – it's a really good example.

> I learnt the benefits of distraction as a technique of control – to divert children from negative situations or problems.

Only 12 of the 60 parents said that they felt they had learnt things

80

by talking to the teachers and none referred to workshops organised for the purpose. Ten parents referred to ideas and information they had picked up through conversations with other parents. An equal number referred to experiences outside kindergarten. Several of these parents had attended playcentre with their child and invariably they commented that they had learnt more about child development there. Two parents referred to knowledge gained through university and teachers' college courses. One had a revealing comment about the local school:

> I haven't found out a great deal at kindergarten. I've found out more from school . . . the school wants to involve parents more than the kindergarten . . . I just couldn't believe the difference. I can take the toddler to the school and have no worries at all. He just fits in. He's not welcome at kindergarten. They keep saying, 'Peter's into the paints' or 'Peter's turning on the taps'. They just don't worry at school. If Peter's painting, he's painting.

Support for Parents: The Teachers' View

There has been a good deal of discussion in recent years about the extent to which, as well as providing a service for children, kindergarten teachers do or should provide a support network for whole families, particularly mothers. We asked the teachers in the national survey whether they felt they had a responsibility to parents other than in matters to do with children. We also asked a series of questions about the support they believe they provide for families.

Just over two-thirds of the teachers surveyed believe they have a responsibility to support the parents in their kindergartens other than in matters to do with children.

Most teachers believe they do have a responsibility because:

i) *If a parent has a problem it is likely to affect the child.*
It is impossible to separate the interests of the child from those of the parent; if a teacher supports a parent they are in effect also helping the child. As one teacher put it:

> The children on our roll come from families and anything that affects that family will affect the kindergarten child. We have a responsibility as their first professional contact to help where possible.

ii) *They may be the only, or most readily available, person for parents to talk to:*

Many ask for help or advice because in a town of a moving and new population some parents know no one else to confide in but the teachers and other parents who may be their first contact in a new community.

I would feel a responsibility to support people in stress whether I was a teacher or not. Being a teacher just brings you into contact with more young families who are perhaps separated from their own parents and more susceptible to stress. I think young parents quite often put kindergarten teachers into the role of their mother.

Other teachers are uncertain of their responsibility to parents because:

i) *So much depends on the issue or problem.*

It all depends on the event that arises. If it is a husband and wife matter such as separation, 'No', if it is a housing or job problem, 'Yes'.

For other teachers, family unhappiness would be an occasion where they would try to be supportive because of the effect on the child, for example:

Depends on the matter – if it is such that the child is suffering e.g. Mum unhappy or family strife – sometimes practical help with teacher as go-between can be of help, e.g. organising child to be minded to give Mum a break.

ii) *Depends on how well a teacher knows a parent.*

iii) *Depends on how experienced the teacher is in the problem area.*

iv) *Not part of the teacher's role.*

Teachers may feel that as human beings they try to be 'supportive' and provide a 'listening ear', but they do not think they have a particular responsibility because they are kindergarten teachers. However, although teachers may feel they do not have a 'responsibility' to support parents, most feel they should do so:

We are here to meet the needs of the children first but if parents need support or have problems we will spend time, preferably out of session, to talk to them but in most cases we refer them to the health nurse or other services.

Supporting parents can conflict with responsibilities to children: problems in meeting parents' needs

Although more than two-thirds of the teachers believe they have responsibilities towards parents as well as children, just over half the

teachers also believe that meeting the needs of parents conflicts with their responsibilities to children. An equal number say they also have problems in meeting the needs of parents.

The main sources of conflict for teachers are:

1. *The appropriate time*

Parents want to talk to teachers at times when the teachers feel they should be concentrating on the needs of children. This is particularly so when a parent's needs are urgent. As one teacher put it:

> Yes, sometimes in that a parent may ring or be speaking to you during a session and although you are aware that the children need you and they may interrupt you, you cannot send the parent away not having finished what they're saying. This of course only up to a point and they or you may suggest speaking again later if it's too chaotic.

Teachers also say that parents frequently want to talk at the end of a session or when they 'drop children off, which is the very time teachers want to greet the children and chat to them.

2. *The appropriate place*

Kindergartens are usually open plan with a small kitchen and office, both of which are in constant use. A number of teachers noted the problems in providing a quiet place for distressed parents to talk in privacy. Other teachers commented on the desirability of a parent area perhaps containing a library on child development and parenting skills.

3. *Teachers' experience and skills*

Many teachers recognise that they lack the counselling skills necessary to give parents with personal problems professional help and support. Younger teachers, particularly, may be aware of their lack of experience and expertise:

> Sometimes I feel I could meet the needs better if I had children of my own – I sometimes wonder how qualified I am to give advice.

4. *Different lifestyles*

Teachers may have difficulty helping parents whose values and lifestyle are different from their own. One teacher wrote:

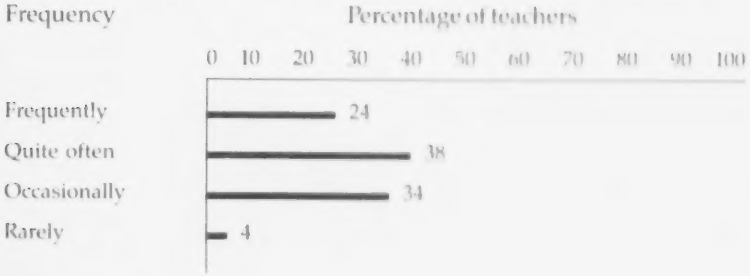
> There are always some parents with whom I find difficulty in establishing a comfortable relationship. It is sometimes difficult to remember that my set of values does not match everyone else's.

This difference in values may be specifically linked to cultural and ethnic differences, causing shyness and self-consciousness between teachers and parents. Problems of communication are increased further with parents who can neither speak, read nor write English.

How often do teachers discuss parent problems?

The likelihood of teachers discussing parent problems with parents varies, and it is difficult to assess how frequently individual teachers discuss parent problems. Much depends on what a teacher regards as a personal or family problem. Through our survey we relied on teacher self-report; observations over time would be necessary to establish a more accurate picture. Teachers' perceptions of the frequency with which they discuss parent problems ranged from 4 percent who said they 'rarely' did to nearly a quarter who said they 'frequently' did. About a third said they did so either 'occasionally' or 'quite often' (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Frequency with which teachers discuss parent problems



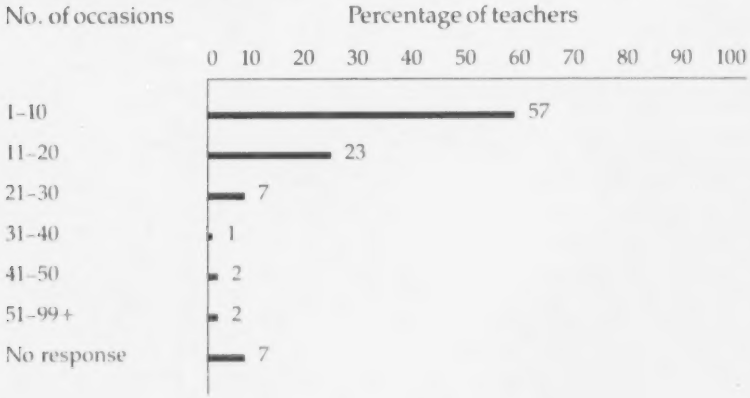
When teachers were asked to estimate the number of times they had talked over problems with parents 'so far this term' (10 weeks), their responses ranged from fewer than 10 times to more than 100. However, 80 percent of teachers said they had discussed problems with 20 percent or fewer parents. The most common category was 1-10 times (57 percent of parents) (see Figure 2).

The length of time teachers discussed parent problems also varied considerably – all the way from five or 10 minutes to two hours, but

the most common length of time for longest conversation was between 15 and 30 minutes.

These lengthy conversations were equally likely to take place during or out of session. Conversations out of session were most likely to take place immediately after a session, encroaching on the teacher's lunchbreak.

Figure 2 No. of parents with whom teachers discuss parent problems



The nature of parent problems

The teachers were asked to indicate the range of problems raised by parents during the previous term. The problems were complex and rarely self-contained; any particular problem was likely to have a flow-on effect to other members of the family. If the problems discussed which focused mainly on adults – marital problems, parent health, employment, finance and family relationships – are combined, they accounted for approximately 50 percent of the teachers' responses. By comparison, child-centred problems – child health, child behaviour, siblings, schooling and routine kindergarten matters – accounted for approximately 42 percent of the teachers' responses. However, if health problems are combined, that is adult health and child health, they accounted for just over a third of the teachers' responses, and if child behaviour is added to child health, just over half of the responses.

1. *Marital problems*

The single category which accounted for the greatest number of teacher responses (nearly a quarter) was marital problems. One teacher wrote:

> Separation! Separation! Separation! Epidemic proportions it seems.

Other teachers specified marital problems stemming from separation such as custody cases and conflict over access, marital breakdown, guilt, anxiety and lack of confidence.

Aggression was another theme – wife and child beating, rape, alcoholism and violence. Problems caused by boyfriends and de facto relationships were also mentioned, as were drug dependency and problems caused by a partner's jail terms. And a string of lesser offences such as a husband who refused his wife the use of the car to attend committee meetings.

2. *Parent and child health*

Parent health (usually the mother's) and child health were each likely to be referred to in about 18 percent of the teachers' responses. Aspects of parent health most frequently reported on were related to motherhood – problems such as unplanned pregnancy, post-natal depression, miscarriage, pre-marital tension and the stress of coping with pre-schoolers. Parents had also talked with teachers when there was a death in the family or when suffering from stress-related illnesses such as anorexia or heavy smoking habits. Mental health, boredom, loneliness, stress and a parent's suicidal tendencies were also mentioned.

Anxieties about child health, especially hearing, sight, speech and other developmental delays, infectious diseases including headlice and ringworm, and the hospitalisation of children, were common causes for parent concern and were discussed frequently. Masturbation, toilet training, bed-wetting and sleep problems were also mentioned.

3. *Children's behaviour*

Problems with children's behaviour were mentioned by teachers almost as frequently as child health, and indeed it was often not possible to distinguish between one and the other, behavioural problems perhaps stemming from health problems. Child aggression, and generally 'unacceptable behaviour' making a child difficult to handle at home and leading to problems with other children at kindergarten,

was a common theme, as were jealousy, rivalry, lying and stealing. Parents also turned to teachers with questions about appropriate child-rearing and management strategies.

4. *Employment and finances*
Teachers reported that parents had frequently talked over with them employment – or more accurately, unemployment – occupational and financial worries, budgeting and housing problems. Mothers also discussed having to augment the family income, the difficulties of combining childcare and paid employment, and the problem of finding a job without workforce skills.

5. *Family relationships and siblings*
A small proportion of teachers referred to problems parents raised about wider family relationships, particularly problems with in-laws such as grandparents living in the same house and having different views on child rearing. Although most discussions were about the child at kindergarten, parents did raise concerns about other children in the family, for example, a brother's serious accident, a retarded sister causing the parent anxiety and the resultant lack of attention for the kindergarten child, a teenage pregnancy, and problems to do with adoption and being a foster parent.

6. *Education and schooling*
A small group of teachers referred to issues parents raised about their child's education, particularly schooling. The most common topic was which school a kindergarten child should be sent to, but other problems were anxiety about how a child would cope at school, what parents had to do to get a child 'ready' for school and appropriate activities for gifted children.

7. *Kindergarten matters*
A few teachers also referred to routine kindergarten matters raised from time to time by parents, such as long kindergarten waiting lists, transfers, and transport arrangements.

Finally there was a list of 'miscellaneous' problems which included both complex issues such as social, ethnic and religious problems (particularly as they affected the children in the kindergarten) and simple everyday matters such as swapping ideas on childcare, cooking, budgeting and recycling old clothes.

Although some of the problems raised were horrendous, and teachers said they gave much time and emotional energy to support

In general, parents just need reassurance that their child is 'normal'.

parents, teachers also indicated that what most parents want is a 'listening ear'. Many 'problems' are just the inevitable little worries of coping with young children, and often the best support a teacher can give is to be friendly and reassuring. As two teachers commented:

> The conversation is usually brief – generally about how their child is doing at kindergarten and his/her health. They may also stay into the lunch-hour if there is anything more or a specific problem they wish to discuss. In general, I find that the parents just need reassurance that their child is 'normal' and that what appears to be a 'problem' in behaviour is in fact not. Relationships with siblings also appear to worry some parents – once again *generally* reassurance seems to be all that is required.

> Usually parents just want to 'let off steam', to tell about the type of day they have had what their toddler got up to at breakfast time etc. They really just want someone to listen.

Referrals by Kindergarten Teachers

Discussions of parent problems can lead to referrals by teachers to other people or services. When asked, 90 percent of the teachers surveyed said that they had made such a referral during the previous year. The estimated number of referrals averaged about 11 per teacher. The range varied from 13 teachers who said that they had not made any referrals to one who reported that she made more than 99.

These estimates need to be treated with caution. First, while many teachers gave exact numbers of referrals to specific organisations, others referred to agencies by vague or inaccurate names and said that they had referred 'dozens' or 'more than they cared to recall' to these services. Second, teachers interpreted a referral in different ways. One teacher may have felt that simply suggesting that a parent take a child to a specialist or agency constituted a referral; to another teacher a referral meant actually setting up the time and place of the appointment for the parent.

Teachers reported referring parents to a range of about 80 different agencies throughout the country. However, although a wide range of organisations were listed, the main number of agencies listed by each teacher was about three, indicating that most make a large number of referrals to a small range of agencies. Table 11 summarises the services to which kindergarten teachers made referrals.

Services used by teachers

The four services to which kindergarten teachers most frequently refer parents are:

- speech clinic.
- public health nurse.
- the Department of Social Welfare.
- the Psychological Service.

More than half of the teachers reported referring children to speech clinics and these referrals, about 900, accounted for more than 33 percent of the total number. Doctors were the private professionals to whom teachers most frequently referred parents (about 30 teachers making an estimated 200 referrals). In the health referrals, teachers sometimes listed doctors and public health nurses together. Individual teachers appeared to favour one service or the other, perhaps indicating a particularly sympathetic general practitioner or good

Table 11 Referrals by kindergarten teachers

Agency	Number of referrals	Number of teachers referring
Health services e.g. – Speech Clinic – Dept. of Health/Public Health Nurse – general practitioner	1643	326
Dept. of Social Welfare	123	47
Psychological services	106	80
Community counselling/support e.g. – Child & Family Health Clinics – Citizens' Advice Bureaux – Marriage guidance – Plunket	376	165
Educational e.g. – Visiting teacher – KTA/Senior teacher	79	27
Parent education e.g. – Parent/family centre – Assertiveness classes	57	12
Pre-school alternatives e.g. – Barnardo's – Playcentres/private kindergarten	51	18
Crisis services e.g. – Womens' Refuges – Help Foundation	30	19
Unidentifiable	29	10
Total	2494	704

liaison with the public health nurse in their area. A further estimated 100 referrals were made by about 30 teachers to the Department of Health. Frequently parents were referred to the Department of Health for their children to have sight and hearing tests.

Many community counselling services were suggested as referral services available to parents. These included hospital-based counselling clinics, church counselling services, marriage guidance, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the local priest or minister, legal aid, Youthline and the police. The Housing Corporation was also referred to.

Kindergarten teachers also suggested the referral of children with special needs to 12 different specialist support services. Of these the greatest number of referrals – about 26 – were made to the Plunket Society, but others mentioned included Parent Help, the New Zealand Society for the Intellectually Handicapped and the New Zealand Red Cross.

Twenty-seven teachers estimated that they had made about 80 referrals to a range of about 12 different educational institutions or educationists for advice. Most significant were referrals to visiting teachers, principals and teachers of primary schools and senior kindergarten teachers.

Teachers also referred parents to other organisations offering childcare and alternative pre-school education. Among these, the greatest number were referred to Barnardo's (33); 10 teachers referred parents to playcentre associations or private kindergartens.

Crisis services were also suggested by 19 teachers on about 30 occasions for support and advice for parents in difficulty. Most frequently referred to in this category was the Battered Women's Support or Women's Refuge but also included were a wide range of organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Lifeline and Crysos (established to help parents cope with babies who cry persistently).

Support From Teachers: The Parents' View

So far we have been largely concerned with the teachers' view of the support they give to parents. Through the parent interviews and observations we tried to see if the parents' views matched those of the teachers.

The parents interviewed were nearly equally divided between those who thought that if a parent had a personal problem the kindergarten teacher was a person she or he could go to and those who thought she

was not. Of the 60 parents interviewed, 24 answered 'Yes', 25 answered 'No', and 18 were uncertain.

A number of parents commented that this was a difficult question to answer as so much depended on how well any one parent knew a teacher, the range and number of their other contacts, and the nature of the problem. One parent who answered 'No' added:

> When would you do it? There's not really time in their lunch break. If you collect your child at a quarter to 12, you know they've got another session at a quarter to 2. They've got to have their lunch in between. After all, it's not a 'Lonely Hearts Club'.

Those parents who answered 'Yes' tended to support their view with a comment about the friendliness and approachability of their particular kindergarten teacher. The comments of several parents supported the view of teachers reported earlier, that it would be appropriate for a parent to go to a teacher for help if the parent's problem was also likely to affect the child. Others, however, questioned whether it was appropriate to approach teachers with personal problems and that they would seek advice from other trained professionals. One commented:

> I really feel that it's not her job – parents should go to social welfare or the medical centre.

Discussing personal problems with teachers

Only 10 of the 60 parents said they had talked to a kindergarten teacher about personal problems. All of these mothers said later that they had other people – family, particularly husbands, friends or church links – to whom they could also go for help. (Those parents who had *not* discussed personal problems with a kindergarten teacher also said that this was because they had family and friends to turn to.) On the face of it, the fact that as few as 10 parents acknowledged that they had talked to the teacher about personal problems was in contrast with kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the support they give to parents.

The parents' responses can be interpreted in a number of ways. Perhaps not many of the parents perceived themselves to have problems; perhaps, if they did, they did not wish to acknowledge the fact to researchers; perhaps they do not perceive the kindergarten teacher as an appropriate person to talk to; perhaps whether they talked about their problems reflected their own personality – some people

have a far greater need to talk than others. One parent, for example, said:

> I wouldn't talk to the teacher even if I had a problem because I prefer to iron things out myself.

Another commented:

> I talk about any problems really. I'm a chatty person. I feel I can talk freely to all three teachers – not that I'd just talk to anybody.

Most of the 10 parents who had raised problems with the teacher found the teacher had been helpful and supportive. One enthusiastic parent commented:

> It was really neat. If you're stuck at home and can't get out and there is no one else, you can come over here [to the kindergarten] and talk, if you don't feel safe with anyone else – it's like the support of a whole family.

Some mothers, especially those who had served on kindergarten committees, had developed friendships and built up support networks from within the kindergarten community and it was to these friends rather than to the teachers that they would turn for help. One mother observed.

> When my first baby was born I knew nobody in the neighbourhood and there was no one to whom I could turn for help. Having served on the committee, I now have a network of contacts built up to whom I could go for help with problems.

The most common reason for parents *not* feeling they would be likely to share their problems with the teachers was because they did not know them well enough. As one parent said:

> It's not that sort of intimate relationship. Not like a good friend. They are friendly and everything but it stops there.

Other parents commented that the age and life experience of the teacher was a factor, something that teachers themselves acknowledge:

> The teachers are very young and not married themselves so I doubt if I would confide in them with a family problem.

Parents' conversations with teachers

If most parents do not believe they talk to kindergarten teachers about

their personal problems, what do they talk about? Three major themes emerged from the parents' comments:

1. *Social conversation*

The predominant subject of conversation, mentioned by more than half of the parents, was general chat about day-to-day occurrences.[7] As one parent commented, 'I'm quite friendly with the kindergarten teachers really. We talk about everyday things.' Weekend activities, mutual friends, the progress of kitchen renovations, the settling in of new arrivals to the district and current events, 'like kindergarten teachers going on strike' were all mentioned as topics of general conversation. Conversations between teachers and parents fulfil a largely social function.

2. *Needs and progress of their child*

Second, nearly half of the parents interviewed said that they had discussed the needs and progress of their own child. Some mothers simply discussed the activities that the child had taken part in during that session. For example, one mother replied, 'We just talk about what Bobby has been doing.' Other parents discussed how the child had settled at kindergarten, as well as his or her physical, social and intellectual development.

Parents most actively seek the teacher's time and attention when they feel that the child is having difficulties at kindergarten:

> Anne [the teacher] did give me quite a lot of help with my daughter initially when she was having trouble settling. Now there is not so much to talk about because she is so much better. I have talked to Anne more than to any teachers previously. They know my daughter really well. I know that if there were any problems that they would ring me up.

Another parent noted:

> If I had a problem child, I would have talked about him with the teachers more.

3. *The kindergarten programme*

The third major topic of conversation between parents and teachers relates to the running of the kindergarten programme. Parents, concerned to support the teachers in the daily programme, talk with the

7. This finding is borne out by a study carried out in Dunedin. See A. Smith and P. Hubbard, *Communication between Parents and Staff in Early Childhood Settings* (Department of Education, University of Otago: 1986).

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teachers about what they can do to help and perhaps discuss the programme.

Parents on the kindergarten committee usually added that they discussed committee matters with the teachers. One mother said:

> I'm on the committee. If they have any ideas they often bring them up with me, for example, new equipment, what I think of it, whether we can afford it. We are on a very friendly basis really.

Difficulties in talking with teachers

Twelve of the 60 parents interviewed said that they spent very little time talking with the teachers. There were several reasons for this. First there were parents who spent little time at the kindergarten because of work or family commitments and therefore had limited opportunity to talk with the teachers. A further group of about six parents said they would have liked time to talk with the teachers, but felt that they were too busy, and the parents were reluctant to intrude. As one commented:

> I would feel like I was intruding if I asked a lot of questions. They have so many others and therefore I'm reluctant to initiate conversation, not because the teacher is not interested, but because there are just too many children.

It was evident that the attitude of the teachers affects the willingness of the parents to bring their anxieties about their children to the notice of the teachers. A few parents mentioned that they had been discouraged from talking with the teachers by negative responses to their overtures for discussion. One mother said:

> What really put me off even discussing the children was that the very first day my daughter went after pre-entry I asked the teacher, 'How did it go?' The snap reply was, 'If there was anything wrong you'd be the first to know' and walked off. The feeling I got from that was that you leave them there and you don't get any great discussion about your child. Your child isn't anything special. Which they're not. They're just one of 55! I just thought that she'd say something like, 'The first day went OK.'

It was clear that many parents have difficulty in finding an appropriate time and the privacy to talk seriously with the kindergarten teacher. Some parents feel quite uncomfortable about discussing their children in public. When asked when she usually talked to the teacher, one mother laughed and said:

Usually in front of 50,000 other mothers! They don't take you aside.

Who initiates the conversation?

When the parents were asked who usually initiates discussion just over half felt that this was shared by both parents and teachers. Although five of the parents felt that the teacher usually initiated conversation, the remaining 15 felt that they usually had to take the initiative. One mother remarked: 'I usually ask but I don't do it much.'

Parents' reaction to discussion with teachers

Thirty-nine of the 60 parents interviewed made positive comments about talking with the kindergarten teachers. Nearly half of those interviewed said that discussion with teachers eased their anxiety and reassured them about the normality of their own child's behaviour or progress. As one mother put it:

> It's reassuring, especially if you have any worries about his progress or his health, whether you're handling your kids right, whether their behaviour is normal, or if you're worried about whether your child is learning.

Another commented:

> At one stage my child was insecure but it pleased me when teachers came out and said how she was getting on with other children. It was good to have just that liaison – she had joined in with the other kids and was getting on independently. That cheered me more than anything else.

The remarks of the parents commonly suggested that they lacked confidence in their own child-rearing skills.

Eleven mothers recognised the value of the educative role of the teacher with both children and parents. One noted, for example, that through discussion with the teacher she had:

> Become more aware of what they [the children] need to know, and we've started some games at home to learn numbers.

Yet another mother described how the kindergarten teacher had solved a problem that she had with her child.

> She actually helped him to stop wetting his pants by asking him to go to the toilet. They go about it in a different way to me.

Four parents mentioned that the discussions they had had were useful because afterwards they were more satisfied about the professional competence of the teachers. One mother remarked:

> They know children pretty well. They notice things about them – their knowledge of children – they're interested in children as individuals not just as a group – they really care about your child.

Of the 60 parents only seven indicated that the outcome of talking with the kindergarten teachers 'didn't make much difference' or was 'not very useful'. Four of the parents felt dissatisfied after talking with the teachers because of negative feelings they believed the teachers had either towards themselves or their children. This was exemplified by the mother who replied:

> I haven't spoken about anything important. I don't get on with one of the teachers. She sort of looks down on me so I don't really talk to her.

Another remarked:

> I struck a negative outlook. My daughter isn't one of their favourites. Perhaps she is on the outer. I know that they do have inner and outer children up there. I know it shouldn't happen but it does.

Teachers' Conversations with Parents

When we talked to the teachers at the end of the Christchurch kindergarten sessions we observed, we asked them to try and recall the number of conversations of any length they had had with parents, and the topics of conversation. This was a difficult task as so many casual exchanges had been made. It is not possible accurately to compare the responses of one teacher with another because what one might have regarded as 'a conversation of more than two or three minutes', another might have considered too brief to mention, or have forgotten that they had had it. Nevertheless the responses do indicate that teachers differ considerably both in the likelihood of their having lengthy conversations with parents and in the topics they talk about.

In total the 43 teachers indicated that they had had approximately 500 conversations, an average of about nine conversations per teacher per day. In one kindergarten, however, neither teacher could recall having had any substantial conversations and at the other end of the scale the two teachers between them claimed to have had a total of about 60 conversations. The most common number of conversations was about five or six. Head teachers were a little more likely than as-

sistant teachers to claim they had had more conversations but the differences were not great.

Topics of conversation

The range of topics raised in conversation with parents was so diverse that it is not possible to categorise them but they fall into three broad areas: what the teachers described as 'social chitchat' (probably the most common category); conversations related to the parents themselves and their families; and matters related to the running of the kindergarten. Personal and family conversations were quite often about health – of the child's mother, or of other family members – but were as wide ranging as mothers' employment, spare-time activities, buying a new house, grandparents and a few conversations about marital problems. Conversations about the kindergarten tended to be either about the child at kindergarten – his or her behaviour, ability to settle in, and progress – or about routine and administrative matters such as admission of new children, committee work and the delivery and collection of children.

Telephone Calls

In the Christchurch kindergartens, at the beginning of the day a checklist was left by the telephone to record teachers' telephone contact with parents. The teachers, and any other adults present, were asked to record all telephone calls made to, or received from, parents between 8.30 am and 3.30 pm. They were asked to record the time and make a brief note about the nature of the call. They were given a list of suggested topics as a guideline.

A total of 48 calls from parents were received by teachers in the 20 kindergartens, an average of just over two calls per kindergarten. The greatest number of calls was six in two kindergartens, followed by five calls in three kindergartens. Teachers in four kindergartens did not receive any calls from parents.

Considerably fewer calls were made out to parents by teachers – a total of 14 calls from the 20 kindergartens. Only two teachers made more than one call, one of these making five. In 12 of the kindergartens no calls were made.

The telephone calls covered a wide range of topics but calls about a child's health, usually from parents to say a child would not be attending, and calls about the delivery or collection of children accounted for

nearly 50 percent. There were about a dozen calls to do with routine administration such as enrolment, waiting lists, transfers, special admissions and addresses and telephone numbers. Parent helping and committee work each accounted for about six calls. It was not possible to categorise the rest of the calls which ranged over topics as disparate as burglary, lost library books, parent health, child progress, road safety, pet mice and catering for a bright two-year-old.

Although two or three teachers said they have controlled phone calls by asking parents not to ring during session time, the checklist covered the period before and after sessions, as well as lunchtime. In most kindergartens we were surprised at how few parent phone calls were made or received.

Parents' Friendships Within the Kindergarten

Teachers claim that kindergartens are a meeting place for parents and a social centre within the community. In the parent interviews a small group of mothers referred to friendships they had made at kindergarten when they were asked about the advantages of kindergarten for themselves. In the Christchurch kindergartens, we certainly observed new mothers gradually 'thaw' and become comfortable within the kindergarten, particularly when a teacher took time to chat for a few minutes and introduced new parents to other mothers. One observer wrote:

> Two mothers whose sons were staying for the first time at afternoon session remained for the afternoon at the kindergarten. One mother was new to the district. The other, who has already had one son at kindergarten, had lived in the district for some years. The first mother was quite shy and awkward at the beginning of the session, sitting with her son. Gradually she relaxed as the teachers talked to her and then introduced her to the other mother to whom she chatted for quite some time. She wandered about, read the notices, noted the mother help information and, as she gained confidence, began to interact a little with other children. By the end of the session she had, on her own initiative, washed and dried the tea dishes. Another mother arrived, bringing a friend who was president in another kindergarten. They went exploring the kindergarten together after introductions to the teachers. By 2.45 pm, 30 minutes before the session was due to finish, five mothers were in the kindergarten chatting amongst themselves about children, kindergarten matters, babies, local social events and cleaning up at the same time.

If she talked to another mother it was probably the parent of a second child in the sandpit.

We observed the parents and their contacts with each other and talked to as many as we could about the friendships they had made through the kindergarten. Since, at each of the 20 kindergartens, relatively few parents stayed for any length of time, the number we observed or spoke to was only a fraction of the roll. Various patterns emerged. First, we observed that parents who stayed to settle their child, usually afternoon parents, were initially among the most diffident because they were unfamiliar with the kindergarten, but frequently, as they watched their own child, they got into conversation with other mothers. A good deal depended on the confidence of the mothers and the independence of their child. It was interesting to reflect on how the children and the activities they chose initially determined who the mothers talked to. If a child played in the sandpit, that tended to be where the mother stood. If she talked to another mother it was probably the parent of a second child in the sandpit. Mothers

sometimes congregated in the book corner, especially if there were adult-sized chairs. As several mothers had babies with them, and one or two breast fed them, this was a comfortable place to sit. Breast feeding, in several instances, was a way into conversation – topics such as shared maternity home experiences and coping with the baby. House buying and renovation was another common theme.

A second pattern was that the mothers who were on the committee were often the ones most likely to feel they had made friends at the kindergarten. Perhaps mothers who volunteer to go on the committee are confident and sociable anyway, but several said that it was not until they became involved in committee activities that they really felt they developed friendships.

The fact that, in some kindergartens, few mothers spent much time talking to each other during the session did not mean that they might not get to know each other at other times, on trips, for example, or at special functions such as kindergarten luncheons or at barbecues. Some mothers were enthusiastic about the friends they had made at kindergarten:

> I've met a lot of people through kindergarten – much more so than the school. It's a friendly, sociable district – we're all in and out of each other's homes.

Overall, however, parents were more likely to say they had 'made acquaintances rather than friends', and that where they had friends who were also kindergarten mothers the chances were that they had first met these mothers elsewhere in the community. Common meeting grounds were the maternity home, plunket, playcentre, playgroups and sports or craft groups. Viewed in this way, the kindergarten is one of a chain of community services, but not the first with which parents come in contact, and not necessarily the one where they first meet each other.

Most of the kindergartens in which we observed had largely Pakeha rolls. We did feel that, in several instances, parents from ethnic minority groups were less than comfortable in the kindergarten environment and with other parents. In one kindergarten, for example, the observer noted that the only parents who did not seem at ease with the teacher and other parents were a Polynesian father and a Chinese mother. In another kindergarten an Iranian mother who stayed in the afternoon to settle her child spent all her time alone with her child and a younger sibling or sat writing a letter. (In Auckland, of course, there is much greater ethnic variety in kindergarten rolls.)

Three fathers had comments to make about their relationship with other parents. Although they were all relaxed about being at the kindergarten, they said they had not made friends. Two said they got on quite well with the mothers but did not join in conversations much because 'The mothers tend to sit around and talk about babies'. The men did not butt in and the women did not often approach them. One father was surprised that we should think that he might make friends through the kindergarten. He felt kindergarten was for his son, not for him. He was happy talking to mothers but would not expect to make friends through children or child-centred activities. When he made friends, and he said he did not have need of many, he did so through his own activities. He appeared to have a different attitude and expectation from many mothers who said, 'You make your friends through your kids.'

Several parents were in fact rather uncomfortable in the kindergarten and critical of the attitude of other mothers. One pair we spoke to said they had not met many mothers because 'around here they are stand-offish'. They had, however, met each other and as they were in the 'same circumstances' (i.e. solo mothers) they now saw each other daily while their children settled, and when they returned early to help clean up said they had spent the morning together.

The following comments of nine of the parents we spoke to reflect a common range of experiences. For the first parent it was only her second day at the kindergarten. She remained with her son so that he could stay as he was still on the waiting list. She had just moved to the district and had not been introduced to or met any parents.

The second mother said this was her second child at kindergarten. She stayed each morning for half an hour because her son liked it. She had stayed more frequently with her older child because the child did not like kindergarten. The mother joined the committee and had met mothers that way, some of whom she still had contact with. She said she would not have made more than casual contacts if it had not been for the committee – 'greetings to others, but often I don't even know their name!' She did not regard kindergarten as a place to spend time with friends. She did not want to help too often; she had other things she would rather do.

The third mother's husband was on the committee. She did not want to go on the committee because she was already on the plunket and playgroup committees. She would go onto the kindergarten committee next year when she went off one of these. She came to help from time to time because her son liked this 'as a special treat', but she

did not spend much time with her son when she came because he spent his time outside on a bike. She had met parents through kindergarten largely because of her husband's link to the committee; she did bits and pieces he could not cope with. She did not really regard kindergarten as a place to socialise although she had continued a link with some mothers through their children playing together outside kindergarten hours.

The fourth parent came from Wellington two and a half years ago. She had made casual contacts at kindergarten. She liked to know the parents of her child's friends and had become particularly friendly with one of these because she shared interests, but did not expect to develop friendship with others. She liked to come to kindergarten because of the friendly, pleasant atmosphere, but the mothers were acquaintances rather than friends. She helped at kindergarten about once a fortnight because she liked to see her daughter's relationship with other children. She did not have much time for extra friends. Her daughter went to ballet and swimming. She had a mother at Leeston and did a lot of gardening. Her comments were not a criticism of the kindergarten, which she believed fulfils her family needs; she just did not regard kindergarten as a place for parents to socialise.

The fifth parent worked full-time until recently so was not able to be closely involved, but she had made friends through kindergarten. She stood around while the children were playing and chatted with the mothers of her child's friends.

The sixth parent arrived to take her child, her third at kindergarten, to the doctor. She had been involved with this committee – that was the way she really found out what kindergarten was all about. She said she had certainly made friends and kept up with some. They tended initially to be parents of children's friends, but her focus was now shifting to school. She went out to dinner every six months in a group (with husbands) of ex-committee people. She said she did not have social contact at kindergarten apart from casual 'Hellos' but definitely made contact through kindergarten.

The seventh parent said most mothers she had met were through her child's friends. She had met a few others but it was hard – 'a lot of mothers just come and drop children off and shoot through.' She had met parents formerly through playgroup and some of these were now at kindergarten.

The eighth parent arrived from Timaru two years ago. She had made acquaintances at kindergarten but not friends. Many said 'Hi', but did not really go any further. She was prepared to meet them half-

way. If you came from elsewhere to Christchurch you were regarded as an outsider. Many of the other mothers were sports-minded and she was not. 'It's a pity really because I'd like to have made friends. Now I have to work because my husband had a serious accident and it's even harder.'

The ninth mother said she had not made any friends through kindergarten although she had lived in the district for four years and had a four-year-old daughter at kindergarten. She had 20-month-old twins and did not help for that reason. She met her friends through playcentre, playgroup, tennis and jazzercise.

Interviewers' Notes

This parent has been separated for five months as a solo father and has cared for his three children for the last two months. His wife is at present unemployed and he works as a computer analyst/auditor working late shifts. He also has another couple living with him so they can care for the children when he is working. Because of his circumstances he has minimal contact with this kindergarten and has never acted as a parent helper.

His second child started at this kindergarten on transfer and they received a home visit. He commented that the home visit for the eldest child prior to any kindergarten experience had been very useful. He thought that by observation of the teachers with the children he had unconsciously learnt much about child development and how to handle children and he specifically mentioned the technique of distraction as a means of controlling potentially negative situations. He had found the teachers helpful in suggesting a referral to the general practitioner for their eldest child who had sight problems. However, he had never shared any of his personal or marital problems with the teacher, preferring the support and help of friends and the welfare officer at work. He thought that it was unlikely that teachers had the necessary training to deal with parental problems and that it was inappropriate to share difficulties with them unless they directly affected the children.

This mother had a very positive regard for the kindergarten and the teacher. She has found them a tremendous support and has a close relationship with the teachers. The kindergarten teacher was a great support when her marriage

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split up. Her eldest child had just started and she was able to bring herself and all three children to kindergarten and stay. She especially appreciated this in winter weather, rather than 'going up the wall' at home. The teachers were helpful about her son's hearing difficulty. She found the thought of all three boys being at school next year rather frightening. She felt this kindergarten was very open and welcoming to parents. A mutual respect exists between parents and teachers.

This mother seemed quite happy with the kindergarten. Her church connections meant that she had support without going to the kindergarten teacher, if a personal problem did arise. She did stress, though, that the kindergarten teachers had been quite useful people to talk to about problems with coping with unsettled foster children (she had been involved, on several occasions, with short-term fostering), and that she would talk to them about children (behaviour and learning). She also liked the flexibility – being able to mother help when convenient, and being able to turn up any time at the kindergarten.

This mother did not see the kindergarten as a source of support for herself or her child, although she had talked to the teacher about minor ailments. She would not go to the teacher about financial problems, if they arose, and would probably talk to friends or relatives about problems. The present kindergarten teacher, she felt, tended to talk down to the mothers and tell them what to do. Her personal support had come though having free time. During morning sessions she was able to return to the workforce part-time, and to make new friends at work. She was quite happy with the kindergarten from the child's perspective.

This mother and her husband are Greek. She has lived in New Zealand for 15 years. Her English is fairly limited and I got the feeling she feels embarrassed about this – she had already apologised over the phone. But we managed quite well. Her kindergarten child was at home recovering from the mumps – very lively, taking part in the conversation, with more fluent English than her mother. I got the impression that there was little real contact between the mother and kindergarten teachers and that the mother did not have much of an idea about the kindergarten programme. I heard from another mother of a nearby kindergarten that this kindergarten has had a fairly poor image in the community. Whether this remains or will change with the new head teacher is still unknown. I know the head teacher and teacher are now home visiting every Wednesday pm.

A brief interview. The mother has had virtually no contact with the kindergarten. The impression she gave was that this was because of the ties and demands of her baby (12 months) born the week the daughter started kindergarten. In some kindergartens mothers would presumably feel relaxed about taking a baby along for a while. Whether or not this would be encouraged at this kindergarten, the mother did not seem to regard it as a possibility.

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THE TOOLS FOR THE JOB: TRAINING AND SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

If kindergarten teachers are expected to work with parents, to what extent are they trained for this responsibility, and do they themselves receive support?

Pre-Service Training

We asked the kindergarten teachers how well they believe their pre-service training had helped to prepare them for their contact with parents. Although six teachers felt their training had helped them 'very well', the highest percentage of teachers (47 percent) felt they had only been helped 'a little'. The remainder were nearly equally divided between those who thought their pre-service training had helped them 'moderately well' (23 percent) and those who thought it had 'not helped them at all' (24 percent). (Teachers in Wellington and Canterbury were nearly twice as likely as teachers in Auckland to believe their training had helped them 'moderately' or 'very well'.)

Experiences outside college

Well over half of the comments made by teachers, regardless of how they had rated the effectiveness of their pre-service training, referred to experiences other than at college as being a better preparation for parent contact. In a few cases the teachers, when they trained, had been mature students:

> I had already had lots of experience through playcentre, and social work, mobile pre-school and YWCA. I think it is difficult to provide experience through pre-service training as the value of what is given is sometimes not appreciated. In-service at about the time a head teacher's job is first gained would be very valuable, I think.

In other cases it was a teacher's own experience as a parent that was most helpful. For most teachers it was a combination of maturity and experience on the job:

> Parent contact is a very difficult thing to learn about through pre-service training. It's a very personal thing. I feel you learn how to cope with and to work alongside parents, through experience and maturity.

> Looking back I was made to realise how important contact with parents is but only experience has given me confidence and understanding.

Practice teaching sections

About 25 teachers referred to practical experience with parents on teaching practice sessions but many of these teachers also commented on the difficulty for students of making other than superficial contact with parents, partly because of the short stay they had on section at any one kindergarten, and partly because of parental attitudes. One teacher wrote:

> During sections, parents offered very little personal information but tended to focus upon student teachers' personal life.

And another:

> As a student we were seldom involved with parents – lucky if we attended a mother's club meeting.

One suggestion was that students, as well as having experience in a range of kindergartens, should also have the opportunity to go regularly to one kindergarten so that they could develop a relationship with some parents. Although a few teachers spoke of experiences they had had of home visits, rather more regretted the fact that visits had not been possible, either because they had sections at kindergartens where home visits did not occur, or, if staff did visit, they did not feel it appropriate for students to accompany them.

The college course

About 50 teachers who thought they had received help at college referred to micro-counselling courses and activities planned in relation

to teacher practice sections, for example, taking a parent workshop and attending a committee meeting. Others said that the course had prepared them for such things as home visits and pre-entry sessions, but what overwhelmed them when they became teachers was the number and range of problems parents raised with them and their own lack of knowledge of appropriate agencies to refer them to. One teacher wrote:

> Until becoming a head teacher I did not realise how many parents seek advice and I was not prepared for the type of involvement required. Training was only a help in dealing with problems about children. I feel more training should be spent on working relationships with parents and more knowledge of referral services.

A small group of teachers, about 10, said the course had provided 'absolutely nothing' of use as far as parent contact was concerned. Others commented that it was so long since they had trained – 20 years in some cases – that they could no longer remember what was in the course. Several of these acknowledged that there had been a change of attitude, partly because of the changing social and economic climate, which had led, in their view, to parents having more problems, and that current training probably emphasised parent contact more than their own training had done.[8]

Teachers made a range of comments about the need for training to be more effective regarding parent contact, particularly the need for

8. Changes in course outlines for pre-service training certainly reflect a growing awareness of the need for kindergarten teachers to be trained to work with parents. Ted Scott describing her training in 1915 in *An Early Wellington Kindergarten* (NZCER, Wellington: 1975) commented: 'When we went into kindergarten work in the old days we had a special feeling about it. We felt we were helping posterity. We felt it was a work of love and that we were doing good. The subjects we studied were Knowledge of Child Nature; Nature Study; Kindergarten Principles and Practice; Class Teaching; Blackboard Drawing; Singing; History of Education with extra training in English . . .; drawing and painting in water colours; practical experience in bandaging toes and knees; feeding, clothing, sleep and general care of little ones; and Handwork – we had lots of that'. (p. 3) Christison records the content of the training programme at Christchurch in 1964 which she considered to be typical of the other three training centres. Reference was made to child development, English, children's literature, health and the arts but no reference to parents or the community. Programmes from various colleges in the eighties, by comparison, refer to courses in working with adults, family relationships, human relations, community studies, working with parents, interpersonal communication, family in a multi-cultural society, different family life style, and voluntary groups and social service organisations. I. Christison, 'A Survey of Pre-School Educational Services in New Zealand', Unpublished MA thesis (Victoria University of Wellington: 1965).

more emphasis to be placed on working with adults. This could be done by making more use of practising teachers. If they were invited to talk to students about their experiences with parents, students would be motivated to learn the necessary communication skills. The thrust of most of the comments, however, was that teachers needed help on the job through in-service training. Particular suggestions were for help with stress management, guidance in counselling parents with problems (particularly marital problems), health and child abuse. Other teachers mentioned the problems they had with parents from lower socio-economic groups and suggested help in understanding the financial problems of such families, including budgeting.

Support for Teachers

Teachers were also asked how much help or support they had had as a teacher in their parent contact at kindergarten. Thirteen percent of teachers said they had received 'a great deal of support'; 31 percent 'quite a bit'; 31 percent 'a little'; 18 percent 'hardly any at all'; and 7 percent 'none at all'.

Support from other teachers

By far the most common source of support were other teachers in their own kindergarten by:

- Sharing responsibility for parents.
- Talking problems through.
- Backing each other up.
- Observing how their colleagues related to parents.
- One teacher coping with the children while the other sorted out a parent's problem.

Support from parents

The next most common source of support was from parents themselves, although this tended to be of a general nature rather than specifically with parent contact. There were, however, parents who took it on themselves to visit other parents in need or who, because they knew families well, could help the teacher in her contact with them. Others, through parent clubs, organised luncheons which helped teachers to get to know parents and parents to get to know each other.

An important way in which parents support teachers is by appreciating the work they do with their children. As two teachers wrote:

> Praise for the way we do things, offers of help in various ways, friendliness and encouragement. After children have gone to school parents still enjoy keeping in contact.
>
> They support professionally – positive feedback. They support as a friend. They always support in running sessions, cleaning up, etc.

Other sources of support

Senior head teachers, particularly those who had organised in-service courses to do with parents (usually help with running pre-entry sessions) were mentioned by about 30 teachers. Other teachers referred to courses which were run independently of early childhood services, for example, self-assertiveness, coping with grief, women's studies, the Samaritans, First Aid, and playcentre and parent centre courses. Family and friends are also an important source of support.

Changes in Working Conditions to Help with Parent Contact

When asked if there were any changes they would like to see in their working conditions to help them in their contact with parents, 80 percent of the teachers said there were. By far the most common change advocated was the need for more staff coupled with the related issue of more time. These two changes accounted for more than half of all the teachers' suggestions.

More staff and time

Kindergarten teachers feel strongly that if they are to cater for the needs of both parents and children, kindergarten staffing must reflect this role. An extra teacher, and fewer children, would allow for more time to be spent with parents during sessions on an informal basis. It would release time for teachers to work with parents, to take more workshops for parents and to home visit. Teachers say parents are most likely to want to talk with staff at the beginning and end of sessions, so an extra staff member could have this as a particular responsibility. An extra teacher would also give parents some choice in who

to approach, depending on the needs of the parent and the personality and experience of the teachers. Other teacher comments were:

> By increasing the amount of staff it would be far easier to talk and counsel parents without the 'guilt' feelings that you are letting other members of staff down during sessions. Parents quite often come in with an urgent need to talk and it is often very difficult or impossible for them to put their problems on hold until the children have left.

> After sessions at 3.30 I am too tired to talk at all. I would prefer to work in a kindergarten or pre-school which didn't have two different groups of parents and children. Often the teacher is all talked out by noon. We see 40 parents at 9 and again at 12 – difficult to start all over again at 1 pm. I think parents at pm sessions must often think we are offhand. I find three-year-olds in the afternoon very, very tiring.

A number of teachers suggested that kindergartens should be funded to employ a teacher's aide to relieve teachers of domestic and administrative chores, freeing them to fulfil their professional responsibilities to both children and parents:

> Part-time office person working at busy times such as children's arrival to handle numerous phone calls, typing and duplicating newsletters, parent donations, so teachers can concentrate on teaching the children and working with parents.

> Part-time parent worker attached to the kindergarten who could go into the home of parents to help arrange transport, special needs, and education about kindergarten.

Underlying most teachers' comments was an unstated assumption that teachers had a responsibility towards parents and only inadequate staffing prevented them from spending more time with parents, but one or two teachers reacted against so much parental involvement:

> More staff so that we don't rely on untrained parent helpers to supply adult interaction in kindergarten.

More time would also mean teachers might expect to have a true lunchbreak. As two teachers commented:

> A system whereby teachers are able to take tea and lunchbreaks (to increase cognitive output!). Tired teachers tend to react to situations.

> I do refuse to talk about problems during my lunchbreak only because I am tired, in need of food and rest and feel I can't give any true attention to other things.

Other suggestions for improved working conditions to help teachers in their contact with parents were, in order of importance:

- closer contact with professional support services.
- ancillary help.
- better facilities for parents.

As these issues have been considered elsewhere there is no need to repeat comments here except to stress the need many teachers feel for a space within kindergartens where they can talk in privacy with parents – as one teacher put it: 'A quiet, interruption free, comfortable zone.'

Finally, a few teachers referred to issues that teachers themselves should discuss and resolve, particularly which teachers were most suited to coping with parents. Several younger teachers wished their head teacher had more confidence in their ability to work with parents. They commented:

> Mothers made to feel welcome at all times, not just when it suits the head teacher.

> More support from the head teacher who was trained to believe that parents are not a very important part of our work.

Interviewers' Notes

This mother, who teaches part-time, is able to adapt her work timetables to those of the children and has been a committee member and heavily involved in the life of the kindergarten. Now, with only one child left there she is transferring this interest and energy to the primary school.

The kindergarten makes no provision at all for home visits. The pre-entry sessions are organised and run by the mothers' club and the mother, being a trained teacher, ran the pre-entry sessions. So the third child attended these regularly before entering kindergarten and was familiar with the environment.

While the mother felt that it might be possible to share personal problems with kindergarten teachers she personally would not choose to do so except insofar as the problem related to the development and education of her children. She had three examples of this in her own experience. Her second child (the elder son) had suffered both poor sight and hearing. The kindergarten teachers

(particularly one) were very supportive and closely monitored and encouraged the child's development to help him make up for the years of limited vision and hearing. They also suggested referral to a speech clinic (which was found to be valuable) to improve his speaking. With the son now at kindergarten she had experienced behavioural problems while the father was away overseas. When this was mentioned to the teachers they had supported her to regain the control she felt that she had lost.

The mother had strong negative feelings about the policy of parent helping under the recent change of staff. Whereas previously parents had spent most of their time sharing in activities with the children they now are assigned to a domestic chore or task relating to preparation for the programme. She felt that children should be encouraged to share with their activities with their parents. Partly because of this change in focus in parent helping (which works on a roster system), she also stays at kindergarten about once a week especially to spend time with her son and share in his activities.

This mother felt that when her daughter was settling in and not talking, the head teacher was a bit harsh – perhaps not as understanding as she might have been when children interrupt. She is not very patient, and yet she is one that Emily misses now. She did get her talking in the end. 'Makes you wonder whether she did need the firm treatment.' The two older children went to this kindergarten. It was more disciplined then – quiet times, music times. 'It is perhaps more casual now.' The teachers make a big difference. If parents are not satisfied with the teachers the word gets around the district. This mother was not involved with the kindergarten but was satisfied with it for her child. This child is her third after a big gap and the mother was involved with the kindergarten life of her older two children.

This was not a comfortable interview situation. The mother and father were present (consent to participate depended on husband's presence). The husband tended to 'correct' wife's responses at times, and criticised one question as 'stupid and too open-ended'. They were happy with the present teacher – both liked structure, timetables, mat work and 'learning school skills'. The mother's main support from the kindergarten was the free mornings to herself, after having two children close together. Talking to teacher about child's behaviour was also mentioned as important.

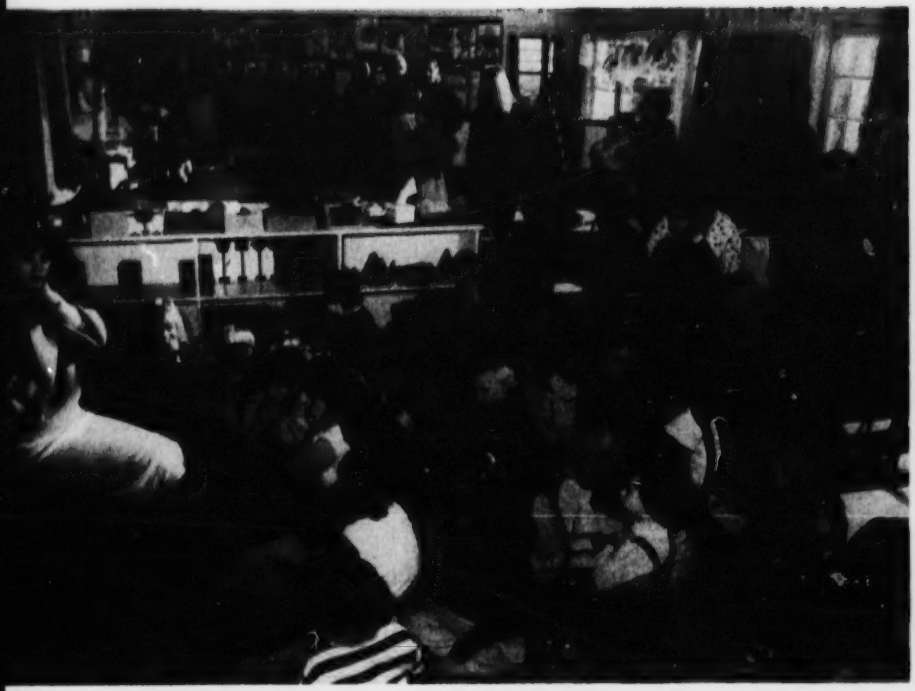
This young mother did not have a great deal to say, partly because, as she works part-time, her mother has more contact with the kindergarten than she does; partly, I think, because she is accepting of the kindergarten, feels it does a good job for her child, and that is it. There have been several recent staff

changes at this kindergarten. At present there is a relieving head teacher. This parent feels she knew the previous head teacher better because she is the one she got to know when her child started afternoon kindergarten. The interview did reveal some of the problems of establishing close parent/teacher contact: changes of teachers; parents working part-time which tends to mean they have contact when their child is either at morning or afternoon kindergarten, but not both, depending on mother's work hours; children being cared for by grandparents; and children being dropped off by other parents who have transport. The mother believes the main function of the kindergarten is to 'prepare children for school', and the kindergarten is doing this satisfactorily. The kindergarten teacher is friendly but the parent does not look to her as a source of support.

A trained teacher and a warm outgoing person, this mother felt very positively about her contacts with kindergarten teachers. Although trained as a teacher, she felt that she had benefited from watching the teachers handle problems of control with younger children, especially the way in which they reasoned with the children. She has also been reassured in her experience and observation in pre-school to find that her children are normal in progress and behaviour.

This woman suffers from multiple sclerosis and both her life and that of the family is governed by the problems created by the disease. The kindergarten teachers have been very supportive and understanding from the outset. At the request of her doctor and her husband, the eldest child was accepted into kindergarten earlier than usual to provide her with regular rest periods (the eldest child being at school). When she was hospitalised the teachers suggested possible sources of day care (although in the end these were not needed). She would dearly like to parent help at kindergarten more than she does. To maintain regular contact she arrives 15 minutes early to help with tidying up. The teachers have always readily accepted the limitations that multiple sclerosis has put on her ability to help in the kindergarten. Her daughter is an asthmatic and she finds that communication about the state of her health is absolutely essential, especially since they must sometimes administer medication . . .

Her daughter was familiar with the kindergarten environment before she began at kindergarten as this kindergarten arranged lunches once a month for mothers whose children had turned three. She was also visited at home about the time she would normally have received a home visit from the teachers had the pre-schooler been starting kindergarten at the usual time rather than earlier as requested by the doctor. She was very grateful for the warm accepting environment, the support that she had received from the teachers with her disease and the opportunity to make friends with other women in the locality.



Usually all the children sit together or the mat, slipping off one at a time as an adult arrives to collect them.

5.
CONCLUSIONS

In this study we have described and commented on kindergarten teachers' daily contact with parents first by establishing what teachers' objectives are in the various kinds of contact they have with parents and then to look more closely at a range of contacts, including parents at kindergarten sessions; home visiting and group pre-entry sessions; parent committees; and the support teachers believe they give to parents as well as parents' reaction to this support.

Most of the information from teachers was collected nationally through a postal survey. Inevitably, this information described what teachers *said* they did or believed; it may not necessarily be what actually happens in kindergartens. In an attempt to tap parental perspectives and to observe teachers and parents during sessions, we interviewed a small sample of parents in Wellington, and carried out one-day observations in Christchurch kindergartens. Although 25 percent of teachers were included in the national survey, limitations of time and resources meant that the sample of parents interviewed and kindergartens observed were both very small and geographically limited. However, reactions to the findings as we have shared them with groups of teachers, suggest that they do reflect a wider reality.

Good Parent-Teacher Relationships

Kindergarten teachers say that their first objective in their contact with parents is to develop an environment where parents and other family members feel welcome. Teachers should work in partnership with parents for the benefit of the children in their care. That teachers have in large measure succeeded in developing a welcoming environment is indicated by the responses of the parents we interviewed, 70 percent of whom said they feel 'very welcome' at kindergarten. Whether teachers work in 'partnership' with parents, however, is a more complex issue which we will consider presently.

Teachers say that the informal contact they have with parents is

among the most valuable in developing positive relationships, and instance the arrival and departure of children as a time when they chat with parents. Individual teachers go out of their way to talk to parents, but from our observations there is less contact at this time than we expected. For one thing, the number of parents likely to congregate, particularly at the end of sessions, militates against teachers talking to many parents. Parents are more likely to talk to each other than to the teachers. Another factor is the way teachers conclude the session, usually with all the children sitting together on the mat, slipping off one at a time as an adult arrives to collect them. As a means of drawing a session to a close, of ensuring that activities are finished and tidied away before the next session, and of providing a group activity for children, this may be organisationally appropriate, but it does not facilitate parent-teacher contact.

However, the value of teacher-parent contact cannot be measured solely by its frequency and length. Cumulatively, even a regular 'Hi' or 'How are you today?' from the teacher can serve to make a mother, largely housebound with young children, feel that somebody cares, that there is somebody there to be called on if the need arises.

The high turnover of children, and the fact that many families have two children influences the extent to which parents and teachers get to know one another. As one parent with a second child at kindergarten said, 'It takes the first child to find your way around.' Parents with one child are likely to have little more than 12 months' contact with the kindergarten. A teacher who had been at the local kindergarten for many years said that with the decrease in family size she had noticed a change in parents' willingness to be involved. In her view, mothers with several children were more inclined to centre their lives around their families and to be willing to be closely involved with the kindergarten. By comparison, mothers nowadays who had only one or two pre-school children were likely to be advancing their own education or pursuing their own interests and less likely to want to help out at kindergarten. Such generalisations are difficult to substantiate but, judging by the number of mothers who talked to us about their outside interests and said they were not keen to offer to help, there may be truth in this teacher's view.

We did not attempt to measure whether the quality of the relationship between parents and teachers had any observable consequences for children. Anne Smith did attempt to determine whether 'parent-staff communication was related to children's interactions with teachers, peers or parents'. She looked at parents, staff and children

in selected childcare centres and kindergartens and concluded that: 'Where there was more parent-staff communication, and it was more balanced, warm and reciprocal, children were more likely to talk with teachers or be close to teachers and were perceived by staff to be better adjusted.'[9] Smith suggested that parents form closer relationships with teachers in childcare than in kindergartens, attributing most differences: ' . . . to be a result of poorer staff-child ratios in kindergartens, and the greater sense of shared child-rearing between parents and staff in childcare centres.' She also commented on how little conversation there was when children were being delivered and collected from kindergarten.

Home visits and group pre-entry sessions

Kindergarten teachers are required by the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union By-laws to visit parents at home and to hold pre-entry sessions for them. Our evidence, however, suggests that by no means all parents will experience both activities, and some will not experience either. Nationally, a third of the teachers said children were 'rarely' or 'never' visited at home. Similarly, fewer than half of the teachers said that group pre-entry sessions were 'always' held at their kindergarten before a child attended sessions. There are also regional variations, in Auckland the group pre-entry session appears to be taking over from the home visit as the preferred means of introducing parents to kindergarten.

The changing ethnic backgrounds of families using kindergartens, particularly in Auckland, may be another factor. It has been suggested by teachers that one reason for fewer visits being made is an increasing awareness of cultural differences and respect for cultural protocol. It is also clear, however, that there is still a great need for both pre-service and in-service training of teachers for cross-cultural communication.[10]

If group pre-entry sessions are taking over from home visits this fact needs to be accepted and its implications considered. There may be

9. A. Smith L. Barham and P. Hubbard, *Communication Between Parents and Staff in Early Childhood Settings and its Relationship to Children's Behaviour* (Department of Education, University of Otago: 1986)

10. An excellent starting point for teachers' reading would be J. Metge and P. Kinloch, *Talking Past Each Other: Problems of Cross-Cultural Communication* (Wellington: Victoria University Press/Price Milburn, 1978) and G. McDonald, *Working with Pacific Island and Maori Parents*, Set 1, No. 4 (Wellington: NZCER, 1979).

fewer teachers making regular home visits than in the past, but those who do visit tend to be very committed to the practice. Whether a teacher makes home visits or holds pre-entry sessions may depend in part on her philosophy. Could there be a tendency for those teachers who home visit to be more concerned with individual children and families, and for those who favour group pre-entry sessions to be more concerned with explaining kindergarten organisation and procedures? The question of the possible consequences of home visits frequently being associated with problem behaviour should also be considered.

The practice of visiting a child's home assumes that most mothers are at home as full-time care-givers of their children. Auckland teachers in particular, argue that the changing work patterns and ethnic composition of kindergarten parents make home visits less appropriate than they used to be. Changes have also taken place in the nature of kindergarten teachers' contact with parents. Traditional activities are now being handled differently, including the introduction of playgroups for younger children, and teachers argue that home visits are therefore less necessary.

Parents at Kindergarten Sessions

The number of parents present during kindergarten sessions varies from kindergarten to kindergarten, as do the reasons for parents staying. Our evidence suggests, however, that only one or two parents are likely to be present during a kindergarten session. Parents who stay for afternoon sessions tend to do so to help settle their child whereas those who stay in the morning are likely to have volunteered or been rostered as parent helpers. Committee members may also spend time doing administrative tasks during sessional hours.

Parents as helpers

The percentage of parents who help regularly varies from kindergarten to kindergarten. A third of the teachers surveyed said that more than two-thirds of their parents would help at least once a term. But another one-third of teachers said that only a third of the parents would help this frequently, and a third of teachers said that less than a third of parents would do so. Of the parents interviewed in Wellington about three-quarters said they would help at least once a term.

The proportion of parents who help at sessions and the frequency

with which they help is probably the most marked difference between the kindergarten and the playcentre movements. When playcentre parents were interviewed in a 1982 study, more than 80 percent indicated that they helped at least once a month.[11] Parents who want to be more closely involved in their child's pre-school education possibly choose playcentre. Kindergarten parents, as we have seen, certainly appreciate time without children. This is one reason why parents do not like a roster system for helping, preferring to choose when they offer to help. However, the restraints that teachers themselves place on helping may be resented by parents. For example, many teachers limit the number of parents who help each session to one or two, or make it clear that toddlers are not welcome.

Although many teachers give clear directions as to what parent helpers are expected to do, lack of guidance is the most common reason for parents feeling uncomfortable or anxious about helping. One reason for this lack of direction may be the constant turnover of parents. Teachers who favour group entry sessions for parents argue that these allow them to give guidance for parent helping to groups or parents rather than to individuals in separate home visits. Teachers also say that although they prepare booklets offering suggestions to parents, parents do not necessarily read them. Another reason for teachers' lack of direction may stem from ambiguity as to what is meant by parent helping. Are teachers just looking for supplementary help for the smooth running of the session, or would they value parents' involvement in the planning and running of the programme? There is a delicate relationship between parent help, ancillary paid help by teachers' aides and the professional status of the kindergarten teacher.

According to teachers, it is more important for parent helpers to work with children than to help with domestic chores, but the 'helpers' we observed spent a high proportion of their time engaged in domestic tasks, either from choice or because they believed this was what was expected of them. This was particularly true of the mornings.

Parents' conversation

The parents present during sessions spent more of their time with

11. G. McDonald, *Working and Learning* (Wellington: NZCER, 1982), p. 32.

children than adults, but they tended to spend proportionately less of this time talking to them. If parents are looking for guidance as to how they might be used more effectively during kindergarten sessions, teachers might consider the value of encouraging parents to spend more time in conversation with children. Three other research studies are relevant here.[12] Anne Meade's study includes an account of adult-child conversations in New Zealand pre-schools. In the pre-schools she visited there was less adult-child talk than most early childhood educators would expect. Children had plenty of conversations with other children but not necessarily with other adults. She found it was exceptional for adults to sit talking with a group of children. Sustained conversations in childcare settings tended to occur in care-giving situations – toileting, preparation of food and getting children ready for a rest. The Tizard and Hughes study, which looked at the quality of adult-child conversation at home and at pre-school, found that the most meaningful conversations took place at home and emphasised the importance of the shared experiences parents and children could draw on. In the kindergarten setting parents preparing morning tea, for example, could be encouraged to include children in the activity and to sit and talk with them while the food is eaten. Parents who are long-term members of the community may well know the children and their families better than teachers. A particularly valuable contribution could be made by parents of minority ethnic groups. It would be important to encourage parents to talk of things other than what Sylva describes as 'the boring stuff of petty management'.[13] In her analysis of verbal encounters between adults and children in nursery schools, the problem was not quantity but quality. She claimed that 80 percent of interactions were to do with instructions about picking things up, washing, milk time procedures and so on.

In several kindergartens secondary school students were present as part of a community service programme. They could also be guided to talk and listen to children. Emphasis on oral language, as well as being an end in itself, would be an excellent preparation for school without teachers being accused of encroaching on school territory.

12. A. Meade, *The Children Can Choose* (Wellington: NZCER, 1985) and B. Tizard and M. Hughes, *Young Children Learning* (Harvard University Press, 1984).
13. K. Sylva et al., *Child Watching at Playgroup and Nursery School* (London: Grant McIntyre, 1980).

Parents preparing morning tea can be encouraged to sit and talk with the children while the food is eaten.

Teachers' Support for Parents in their Child-rearing Role

There is an expectation that, through having a child at kindergarten, parents will increase their knowledge of appropriate child-rearing practice. An objective for pre-school education in kindergartens, for example, is: 'To encourage parents to participate in the programme in order that they may gain a greater understanding of their child and

are able to meet his needs'.[14] Teachers are encouraged to take discussion groups and workshops with parents. The Director of Early Childhood stated that: 'Successful early childhood programmes enhance and assist parents in their family rearing role.'[15]

Teachers in our survey certainly indicated that supporting parents in their responsibility of caring for their children and helping them to increase their knowledge of child development was one of their objectives. However, although the parents we interviewed in Wellington agreed that they had picked up knowledge of child development from having a child at kindergarten, we did not feel that this experience rated very highly for most of them. If parents had gained insights it was almost invariably on the basis of their own observation. Few referred to conversations with teachers and none to specifically organised workshops for parents on topics related to child rearing. We did not ask the parents where they would go for information about child development. Teachers in Christchurch also indicated that parents shied away from anything with a 'parent education label'.

If our interpretation is correct, it suggests that the likelihood of parents gaining knowledge is haphazard and left to chance. There is an assumption that simply by being present at sessions parents will automatically increase their understanding. Overseas studies point to the danger of making such assumptions. Smith, for example, commented on the fact that in their study: 'Although staff might hold the view that involvement was a means of learning for parents, there was very little discussion between staff and parents about the group's activities or objectives.'

She suggests that the emphasis on 'free play, enriched environment, and learning through exploration' for children perhaps encourages the view that parents, too, will 'learn simply through exposure', but goes on to suggest that:

> It may be that exposure and shared experience is simply too low-key, and not sufficiently explicit, for parents to learn as much as they could about how to foster their child's development. Our evidence certainly suggests that opportunities were missed to build on parents' excitement or flashes of understanding and insight, or their desire for more

14. *Kindergarten Administration: A Guide for Senior Teachers and Senior Head Teachers* (Department of Education, Wellington: 1982), p. 5.
15. V. Burns, 'Early Childhood Education Revisited . . .' (Paper presented at Turangawaewae Marae: 1983).

information. We should note Barbara Tizard's comment (Tizard, 1978) that parents' greater knowledge of what went on in the group did not necessarily bring with it any greater understanding of these activities. But is this so because parents fail to understand, or because staff do not build on the opportunity to help parents learn?[16]

Parent education

Parent education, like parent involvement, is a slippery concept, and can have different meanings and interpretations depending on the persuasion of the user. It is not clear to what extent kindergarten teachers have a responsibility to undertake, facilitate or liaise with other groups regarding parent education. Whatever their role is presumed to be, parent education at present is very much on the wing. Reports such as the Hill Report make statements to the effect that 'Parent participation and parent education are important matters to the pre-school movements'.[17] Other commentators have pointed to differences between the various pre-school services and attitudes towards parent education. Meade, for example, writes that:

> The playcentres run a variety of workshops, lecture series and courses . . . nowadays they centre on play, child development and human relationships. Parent education is more of an intermittent activity in the kindergartens, and parents of kindergarten children mostly turn to other institutions for adult education courses, as do those playcentre parents wanting classes to supplement playcentre parent education activities.[18]

There is no mention, in either the Kindergarten Regulations or the Standard By-laws for Associations, of teachers having any responsibility for 'parent education', although they certainly referred to this when they talked of their responsibilities to parents. The Department of Education's Guide for Senior Teachers and Senior Head Teachers, *Kindergarten Administration*, sees discussion groups and workshops as being 'valuable for parents' and suggests inviting such people as speech therapists and public health nurses, but a parent education role is not specified. The only suggestions made for parent workshops

16. T. Smith, *Parents and Pre-School* (London: Grant McIntyre, 1980).
17. *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Pre-school Education* (Wellington: Department of Education, 1971), p. 43.
18. A. Meade, *Pre-school Volunteers*, Set 78, No. 2 (Wellington: NZCER, 1978).

are 'for parents to make equipment to take home or use at kindergarten or to repair and repaint equipment'.

However in a Department of Education circular (1981/102, Appendix A) concerned with '. . . the administrative measures necessary to implement the scheme for increased professional support for kindergarten teachers and free kindergarten associations' through the appointment of extra senior head teachers in the section: *Duties of Senior Head Teachers and Senior Teachers: Responsibilities to Staff*, states that a duty is 'to encourage and support parent education on a co-operative basis amongst kindergartens' (2(d)).

Given the current government support for early childhood education and concern about parenting and parent education, the role of kindergarten teachers is an important issue. Are teachers likely to be regarded by parents as an appropriate source of information? How skilled are teachers, particularly the young and childless, at listening non-judgmentally to the views of parents? How sensitive are they to cultural differences in child-rearing practices? Kindergarten teachers are professionally 'trained' but a danger of professionalism is the possibility that 'expert knowledge' can set the professional apart from the lay 'untrained person', in this case, the parent.

It is commonly assumed that parents have something to learn from helping at kindergarten but do we really want parents to behave more like teachers with their children? Jill Pinkerton, commenting on Teresa Smith's work, wrote:

> Many practitioners are dissatisfied with their own behaviour when they look at themselves in some depth. They spend too much time managing the children and they tend to dominate in conversation. Until we know more about how parents interact with their own children at home it is dangerous to assume that parents can improve their practice as educators by helping at preschool and modelling their behaviour on professionals.[19]

Similarly, Lilian Katz, in discussing the distinctions between the roles of teacher and parent, talks of the need for parents to be spontaneous in dealing with their children. She believes that:

> Many programmes of parent education run the risk of encouraging parents to become excessively cerebral and self-conscious in responding to

19. J. Pinkerton, A Review of the Oxford Pre-school Research Project in *Times Educational Supplement*, 14 November 1980.

their children. Extreme pressure to modify their behaviour may lead parents to a condition called 'analysis paralysis', or inability to act with confidence, which could be damaging to the mother-child relationship.

Furthermore she believes that: '. . . increased knowledge for mothers may . . . serve to undermine what is often rather fragile confidence when facing "experts" who may appear comparatively cool and confident in their own advice and procedures.'[20]

We certainly interviewed parents who lacked confidence, who wondered why we had chosen to interview them because they did not think they had anything to contribute. They were happy to accept the teacher as the professional and hand over their child. Parent education in such a situation could be a two-edged sword; unless the teacher is very skilled it could serve to confirm parents in their feelings of powerlessness.

Teachers' Support of Parents with their Own and their Children's Problems

Most teachers believe that they have a responsibility to support parents in matters other than to do with children, usually because of a belief that if a parent has a problem it is likely to affect the child. Yet just over half of the teachers also believe that meeting the needs of parents conflicts with their responsibilities to children, usually because parents wish to talk when teachers feel they should be concentrating on the children.

It is difficult to get a clear picture of the support teachers give to parents. For one thing, so much depends on what is considered to be a parent problem. Parents may not always recognise or acknowledge that they have received support from a teacher. One parent we spoke to, for example, assured us that she never discussed personal problems with the teacher. By the end of the session, however, both teachers, the researcher and another parent present all knew that the parent was anxious about having a hysterectomy and had offered sympathetic comment. Teachers undoubtedly give a great deal of low-key day-to-day support simply by exercising an open door policy where parents are free to come and go and chat to each other. They

20. L.G. Katz, 'Mothering and Teaching – Some Significant Distinctions' in L.G. Katz (ed.), *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, Vol. III (Ablex Pub. Co., 1980).

also help in times of crisis but overall it is probably the ongoing support that most parents value.

From time to time parents will turn to a kindergarten teacher for support in a crisis. The likelihood and frequency of this happening will vary from teacher to teacher and locality to locality. As mentioned earlier, few of the parents interviewed had discussed their problems with a kindergarten teacher, but the evidence from teachers certainly indicated that parents do so. Crisis situations aside, parents, by and large, want to feel welcome at the kindergarten, and to be valued for the contribution they are making to the development of their own child. They appreciate the freedom to come and go, and to know what is going on. If parents come up against a major problem in their private or family life they are likely to go to family and friends for support. Parents agree that the kindergarten teacher is someone they could go to if necessary, but they say that they are unlikely to do so themselves. Furthermore, it is difficult to find an appropriate time and place within the kindergarten day to discuss personal problems. The comparatively short length of time parents and teachers have to get to know each other, and the youth and inexperience of many teachers also militates against parents sharing personal problems. The exception to this is problems to do with the children themselves. This is a view shared by teachers. A much larger sample of parents than the 60 we interviewed would be needed accurately to gauge the level of support parents value from teachers.

Because parents view the kindergarten as being primarily for children, the best way teachers can support parents is to provide a high quality programme for children. Similarly, because the main gain for parents is child-free time provided in a socially acceptable way, kindergarten teachers who provide this are supporting parents in the way they most value.

Even those teachers who most believe that they have a responsibility to support parents in matters other than those to do with children, feel that there are limits to their responsibility and expertise. For this reason it is important that kindergarten teachers are well informed about the professional services to which parents can be referred, and that other professionals recognise the part kindergarten teachers can play in supporting parents.

Support can be a two-way process. Although we questioned parents about the support they might receive from teachers, we did not ask teachers if they had received support from parents. Several, however, did comment that the greatest support parents could give them

was to appreciate what they did for the children. We did have examples of parents who had helped a teacher settle into a new district and a parent who had talked to the teacher about the teacher's childlessness which led to a discussion about adoption (the parent was an adoptive parent).

Other Issues

Some other issues related to kindergarten teachers and their contact with parents need to be considered.

The overwhelming acceptance of early childhood education

Another point to emerge from our research is parents' overwhelming acceptance of the value of early childhood education. When we interviewed parents in Auckland, for both mother and child it was likely to be their second experience of a pre-school. Most of the parents said that their child had already attended either a playgroup, a playcentre, a private kindergarten, a creche or a childcare centre. This commitment to early childhood education is a relatively recent development in New Zealand. Less than 20 years ago it was considered unlikely that pre-schools would ever serve more than a minority of children.[21] Now kindergartens, at least in the Auckland region, are becoming the final pre-school a child may attend in a progression between informal playgroups and the school system. Playcentres are particularly important in this chain. Although the majority of children who enrol at a playcentre remain there until school age, it was obvious from the comments of a number of mothers we interviewed that they regarded a playcentre as a stepping stone on the way to the kindergarten, and so to school.

Variations in parent-teacher contact

One of the clear messages from our observations is the extent to which contact between teachers and parents varies from kindergarten to kindergarten. Three factors are likely to influence the amount and

21. See, for example, *Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1962), p. 199.

degree of contact. The first is the personality and confidence of individual teachers. Teachers vary in the degree of responsibility they feel towards parents, and in their views of the role of parents in the kindergarten. These attitudes may be influenced by the length of their teaching experience, particularly the time spent in their present kindergarten.

The second factor is the composition of the community. This includes the economic status and ethnic background of typical families, as well as the location of the kindergarten. Particularly important is the distance most parents have to travel from their homes, and the proximity of the kindergarten to other community services; this influences the extent to which the kindergarten is a focal point in the community.

The third factor is the personality, circumstances and experiences of individual parents; their attitude towards the role of parents and teachers in the kindergarten; their perception of the teacher's attitude towards them; the length of their association with the kindergarten; their other interests and associations; their work commitments; the number of children they have in their family; the place in the family of their present kindergarten child; their ethnic background; and their economic and marital status.

A characteristic of the teachers in the kindergartens we observed was the number who had stayed for a long time in one area. In at least half of the kindergartens one teacher had been at the same kindergarten for 10 years or more. Two teachers had been there for 20 years, and two for 18. Several were foundation staff members of their kindergarten. As one said, 'I've been here for ever'. These teachers were obviously well-known in the community, a fact which facilitated contact with parents. One or two teachers were actually teaching the children of their first kindergarten pupils – so they certainly knew the mothers! In contrast there were about half a dozen kindergartens where the staff cannot have had much opportunity to establish close community contact. In five or six kindergartens both teachers had been at the kindergarten for less than 12 months and in one case both teachers were relieving.

Teacher-parent contact may also differ between morning and afternoon sessions. Parents are more likely to be present in the morning because the roll numbers and the percentage of children who actually attend is higher. (In the kindergartens in which we observed the average percentage attendance of children was 86 percent in the mornings compared with 77 percent in the afternoons.) Parents of 'morning'

children are more familiar with the kindergarten, have had a chance to get to know the teacher, may have got to know some parents, and perhaps become involved in the committee. On the other hand, their children are likely to be more settled and parents may be less inclined to feel the need to stay for the child's sake. An exception to this would be parents, and we observed several, who had a child nearly ready for school. They felt they were 'nearing the end of an era' and stayed to savour the last of their child's pre-school years. Parents may drop in and out of either sessions but parents who stay in the morning tend to do so as 'helpers', rostered or otherwise, while parents who stay in the afternoon tend to do so to settle their own children.

Support for teachers in their contact with parents

If working with parents is part of a kindergarten teacher's role, teachers themselves need training and support and, most believe, changes to their working conditions. However, teachers tend to believe experience on the job, increased maturity and, for those with children, their experience as parents to be most relevant. For these reasons, although pre-service training is important, particularly courses on working with adults and human relationships, in-service training is more valuable. We do not know nationally what proportion of teachers teach in the region where they train, but it was interesting to note the high percentage of teachers employed by the Auckland Kindergarten Association who were trained in Auckland – nearly 80 percent of the head teachers surveyed in Auckland were Auckland-trained. This means that those responsible for training can assume that most teachers will be employed in the region where they train and should allow for continuity between pre-service and in-service training and for close liaison between the teachers' colleges and local associations.

The support teachers value most is that given by their own colleagues. The change teachers would most like to their working conditions is increased staffing. The current policy of providing kindergartens with a third teacher will presumably go a long way towards satisfying the teachers' wishes. Increased staffing will allow for the possibility of improved parent-teacher contact but will not of itself ensure it. The extra teacher will add to collegial support and help reduce the isolation felt by some teachers. More time should be available for work with parents, both for informal contact during sessions and for arranging specific workshops or courses for parents. The possibility of

home visits should also be increased.

On the other hand, teachers who hold the view that there is a need for more staff so that '. . . we don't have to rely on untrained parent help . . .' may further inhibit the involvement of parents in kindergarten sessions. Parents reluctant to offer their help in the first place may, with increased staffing, be even less inclined to do so.

Some parents indicated that they were likely to turn for support to one teacher more than the other. Frequently this was the head teacher but the personality of both teachers was important. Adding an extra teacher increases the pool of teachers from whom parents may choose but a lot will still depend on the personality and skill of particular teachers.

As well as extra teachers, teachers suggest the need for ancillary support. Once again this could militate against the involvement of parents at kindergarten sessions. Teachers might be increasingly freed to work with parents, but the teacher's aide might find herself cast in this role. We observed a teacher's aide in a few kindergartens where she spent a good deal of time in the kitchen which became a focal point for parents, particularly when the aide was a long-term resident of the community and a companionable person.

Parents' friendships at kindergarten

Kindergarten teachers argue that the kindergarten is a focal point in the community and a centre where parents develop friendships. The preamble to the Kindergarten Teachers Association Constitution describes the kindergarten as being part of a chain of community services. The parents' pattern of establishing friendships reflects the same view. Although parents undoubtedly make friends at kindergarten, the ones we talked to were more likely to say they made acquaintances. Where they had friends at kindergarten, the chances were that they had met them at the maternity home, the plunket rooms, playcentre, sports clubs, the church or other community groupings. The more closely parents were involved in the kindergarten, as committee members, for example, the more likely they were to establish friends at kindergarten. The rest, although they certainly enjoyed chatting to other parents at arrival and departure time, and this regular contact was important, were more likely to pursue friendships made elsewhere.

The teachers' view

Although one of our aims was to look at parent-teacher contact from the parents' as well as the teachers' perspective, the way the material was collected and organised, and the way this book has been written, gives primacy to teachers. It is always easier to get the professional's view; the teachers' view, not the parents', tends to dominate.

The study is further limited in that while the teachers' views were collected nationally, by self-report through postal questionnaires, the parent interviews and observations were carried out in one region only. It is not possible, therefore, confidently to compare findings from the three different sections of the study.

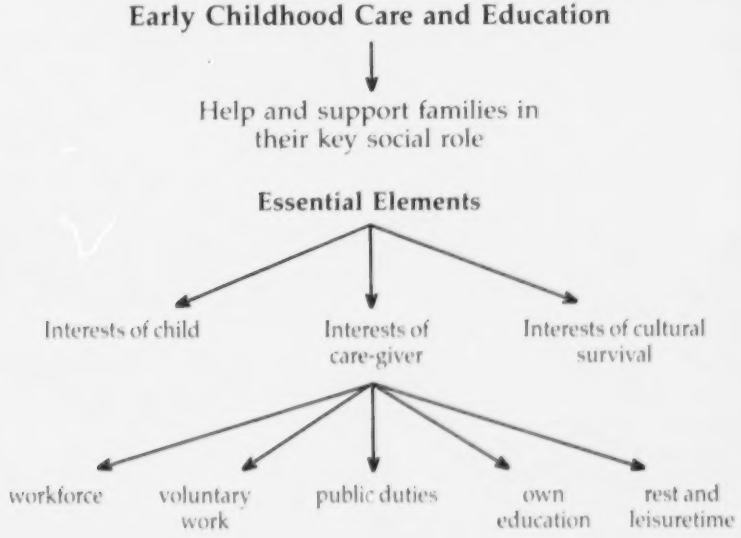
A Changing View of the Parent-Teacher Relationship

There is little in the current kindergarten regulations which refers to parents and teachers. References to parents in the handbooks of the various kindergarten associations tend to be written from the teacher's point of view. The manual of the Auckland Kindergarten Association states, for example, that: 'Parents have the right to know what kind of education is provided at the kindergarten, the pattern of work, the guidance a child is receiving and the purpose of pre-school education in general.' The tone is very much the professional telling the parent what to expect. This does not fit well with the language of partnership and spirit of co-operation underlying the philosophy of recent educational reviews.

The basic tenet of *Administering for Excellence*,[22] for example, is: 'That the running of the learning institution be a partnership between the professionals and the particular community in which it is located.' Similarly, in *Education to Be More*,[23] kindergartens are considered within a total framework of early childhood services concerned with helping parents and supporting families in their key social role.

22. Report of the Taskforce to Review Educational Administration, *Administering for Excellence* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1988).
23. Report of the Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group, *Education to Be More* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1988).

Diagrammatically this holistic model of early childhood services could be represented as:



Although most kindergarten teachers would accept that by providing services for children they are enabling parents, usually mothers, to have more control over their lives, this is not explicitly stated. The parent tends to be seen in relation to the child rather than as an individual with needs of her own. There is always the possibility of tension between providing a service which is in the best interests of the child and also in the best interests of the care-giver. One practical manifestation of this is the inability of the kindergarten services, with a few exceptions, to provide more flexible and extended hours of service. The tension is also manifest in the fact that, although mothers undoubtedly value their child-free time, they are often reluctant to admit the fact.

Although the relationship between teachers and parents is important, the main focus of the kindergarten for both teachers and parents

is still the child. Although there are teachers who believe the needs of children cannot be separated from those of the whole family, particularly the mother, most teachers give first priority to children. Similarly, although parents may value the experience they have through the kindergarten – particularly the support they get from teachers – and may be disappointed or offended if they do not feel welcome, they judge the kindergarten primarily by the experiences of their child. We believe that a hidden contract is operating where both sides agree that closer involvement of parents is not what either party wants. Rather than reflecting a true partnership between kindergarten teachers and parents, our evidence supports the view that the two worlds of the kindergarten child – the home and the kindergarten – 'co-exist in parallel'.[24]

A university essay due tomorrow.

24. See P. Blatchford et al., *The First Transition* (NFER: Nelson, 1982), p. 164.

It's amazing how grossly I've underestimated the pre-schoolers. Their ability to learn – phenomenal, extraordinary!

6.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

As with most research studies this project raised more questions than it provided answers. Most of the issues considered in the study are of ongoing concern. The following are suggestions for discussion topics for training groups, for parent/teacher meetings, or for teachers to talk about in their own kindergarten.

Parent-Teacher Partnership

- In the kindergarten context, what does the word 'partnership' mean?
- What do you understand by the word 'professional'?
- Is there a danger of 'expert knowledge' setting the teacher apart from the parent?
- With the changes taking place under *Before Five* in what ways will teachers be accountable to parents?
- How can teachers 'empower' parents?

Kindergartens are for Families

- Do parents regard the kindergarten as relevant only for their child, or for the family as a whole?
- Do you believe any tension results from kindergartens providing a service which is in the best interests of both the child and the parents?
- Is the service provided for families sufficiently flexible for parents (e.g. days and hours of opening, costs, mixed age sessions, etc)?

- How can kindergartens improve their service for families from ethnic minority groups?
- How can kindergarten teachers acknowledge the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi?

The Kindergarten Programme

- How can kindergarten teachers ensure that parents understand the teachers' goals for the children in their care?
- Should parents have a say in the kindergarten curriculum?
- What do parents expect their child to 'learn' at kindergarten?
- Are teachers confident about explaining a free-play philosophy to parents?
- How could teachers find out whether or not parents are satisfied with the kindergarten programme?
- Do parents expect the kindergarten programme to prepare children for school?
- What methods of discipline do teachers use?
- Do parents accept the teachers' methods?

Parent Involvement

- What do you understand by the term 'parent involvement'?
- Do parents wish to help regularly at sessions?
- What are the advantages of having parents as helpers?
- Are there any disadvantages in having parents as helpers?
- How can teachers ensure that parents are comfortable in their role as helpers?
- What would you expect parents to gain from helping at a kindergarten session?
- What suggestions have you for involving fathers more?

- How can parents be encouraged to share their skills and abilities with children during sessions?

Parent Education

- What do you mean by the term 'parent education'?
- Is the kindergarten teacher an appropriate person to assist with parent education?
- What form might parent education take in the kindergarten?
- What problems are associated with parent education?
- Do you think parents expect to increase their knowledge of child development by having a child at kindergarten?
- Are parents interested in workshops on child development and various aspects of play?

Teacher-Parent Support

- Support can be a two-way process. In what ways can teachers best support parents? In what ways can parents best support teachers?
- Are there any factors that make it difficult for teachers and parents to develop supportive relationships?
- What support do you believe kindergarten teachers need to improve their relationships with parents?

Invite parents on a casual basis to make short visits during kindergarten sessions.

7.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TRAINING

This book was written with training groups in mind. The following are some suggested activities students might undertake in conjunction with reading the text.

Enrolment and the Waiting List

- Students to read the comments on pp. 6-7 and then make a list of parent concerns. Can you think of any others?
- Working in small groups, students to discuss ways teachers might deal with those things that puzzle or worry parents. Students might then:
  - Try their hand at writing a pamphlet for parents with a child due to be enrolled.
  - Prepare a checklist for teachers of matters that should be raised with parents when they enrol a child.
  - Work out a procedure for teachers when a child is enrolled, outlining the steps to go through, including showing the child and parent through the kindergarten.
  - Prepare a list of ways teachers might keep in touch with parents and children while a child's name is on the waiting list, for example:
    - Invite them on a casual basis to make short visits during kindergarten sessions.
    - Bring their child to a playgroup.
    - Give them a list of names and addresses of families already on the kindergarten roll so that they can get in touch with neighbourhood families.
    - Invite them to family functions and fundraising activities.

- Prepare a list of greetings in other languages (with phonetic pronunciations) to be kept on a kindergarten file.

Home Visits in a Cultural Context

Some teachers reported that they found particular difficulties visiting families at home if they were from ethnic minority groups. It would be helpful if students had the opportunity to:

- Listen to parents from other cultures, particularly Polynesian and Pacific Islanders, talk about home visits.
- Spend time in the homes of families from cultures other than their own.
- Try to identify some of the cultural expectations and constraints that might operate when kindergarten teachers visit the home.

Group Pre-Entry Sessions

- Parent reaction to group pre-entry sessions would be a useful topic for students to discuss as a way of increasing their understanding of parental reaction to kindergarten activities.
- Students could work out strategies for overcoming the problems parents experienced in this study (see pp. 25-26).
- When students are in kindergartens they could observe parental reactions to group pre-entry sessions and, if possible, discuss some of the issues with parents.
- A panel of kindergarten parents could be invited into college to discuss their pre-entry experiences and what their needs were at that time.
- After discussion, students could write a set of principles and practices that would guide them when they came to run their own pre-entry sessions.

Parent Helping

- Students to discuss the issues raised on pp. 39-47.

- If this is parent helping as it is now, what ideas might students develop to make the experience of parents and their contribution more valuable?
- How might the controversial issue of toddlers at kindergarten be handled? For example, have kindergartens got the space and inclination to have an appropriately stocked play pen?

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APPENDIX 1:
THE RESEARCH PROJECTS

Project One: The first project was carried out in Auckland in 1983 and looked at the way parents are introduced to kindergarten, particularly through home visiting and group pre-entry sessions.

Sample and methodology

Teachers: All kindergarten head teachers in the Auckland Association (83) were surveyed, as well as all teachers who were not head teachers from each kindergarten (87). These surveys were in the form of postal questionnaires.

Parents: Fifteen parent interviewers and the researcher interviewed parents from all kindergartens in the Auckland Association (80) using an interview schedule. One hundred and fifty-six parents were interviewed. (Because of pressure of time and transport, 20 of these were interviewed by telephone.) The parents selected for interview were parents of first children who had started kindergarten closest to 6 June 1983. Although in two cases both parents were interviewed, the parent interviewed was usually the mother. One hundred and fifty-two mothers were interviewed, five fathers and one grandparent.

Project Two: The second project was a national study designed to look at a wide range of parent-teacher contact.

Research Method

The major part of the research was carried out through a survey of kindergarten teachers using postal questionnaires. This was the most economical way of collecting information nationally about kindergarten teachers' contact with parents, and the issues related to parents that concern teachers. We also wanted to incorporate the views of parents with those of teachers, and to observe teacher-parent contact for ourselves. As face-to-face interviews and observations are expensive and time-consuming, our sample for the parent interviews and kindergarten observations was small and geographically limited. However, we believe that the interviews

and observations helped us to flesh out the information collected from teachers through the surveys. We were able to extend and in some instances question the information from teachers, introducing a parent perspective to teacher-parent contact.

1. The national survey of kindergarten teachers (1985)

The questionnaires were sent to a 25 percent sample of kindergarten teachers. The teachers were selected by taking the name of every fourth teacher on the Department of Education's kindergarten payroll. Two hundred and fifty-eight teachers were surveyed and 228 (92%) completed questionnaires.

2. Parent interviews in Wellington kindergartens (1985)

When the survey of teachers was completed interview schedules were prepared for parents. The interview schedules covered topics already raised in the questionnaires for teachers as well as questions based on suggestions from teachers.

Selection of families

The parents' interviews were carried out in the greater Wellington region. The parents interviewed were selected through 15, or half of the kindergartens, where a teacher had already responded to the teachers' questionnaire. Families selected for interviewing had one or more children on the kindergarten's morning roll. From each kindergarten's morning roll list, arranged alphabetically, eight children's names were selected, using random number tables. In total five interviewers interviewed 60 adults, of whom almost all were mothers (the exceptions were one father and one grandmother). Fifty parents chose to be interviewed in the home, eight at kindergarten, and two at other locations they found convenient. The interviews were recorded.

3. Kindergarten observations (1986)

The fieldwork was concluded with one-day sessional observations in 20 Christchurch kindergartens, and four Nelson kindergartens (although the latter are not reported on in this text). The observations were carried out in South Island kindergartens because we wanted as wide a regional representation as possible in the study. The kindergartens visited were those in which a teacher had completed a postal questionnaire in the first phase of the study.

The focus of the observations was to describe the contact between teachers and parents during a kindergarten session. This was done by:

(a) Observing parents and teachers as children were delivered to and collected from kindergarten.
(b) Filling in an observation schedule at 10-minute intervals between 9.30 and 11.30 am and 1.30 and 2.30 pm. The schedule required the observers to note:

    i) How many parents were present,
    ii) Whereabouts in the kindergarten they were,
    iii) Who they were with,
    iv) Who they were talking to,
    v) What they were doing.

(c) Talking informally to parents during the session.
(d) Asking the teachers to fill in a telephone check list of calls to and from parents.
(e) Asking teachers at the end of the session to try and recall how many parents they had talked to that morning, apart from short greetings, and what they had talked about.

We are aware of the dangers of generalising on the basis of a single researcher's one-day observation in a small sample of kindergartens particularly when there was only a limited opportunity for the observer to discuss what they observed with either teachers or parents and add their explanation to his or her interpretations. The observers all had the experience of teachers saying, 'If only you had been here last week . . .', or 'There weren't many parents here today but usually . . .', or 'It's amazing how quiet the phone has been today – usually it rings all the time'. With these provisos in mind we believe that the information gathered through the observations, added to that of the parent interviews and teachers' questionnaires, has enabled us to paint a picture of teacher-parent contact in New Zealand kindergartens. Judging by the reaction of groups of teachers with whom we have already shared the information, they recognise themselves.

Research Grants

Project one

The project was supported by the Auckland Kindergarten Association, who contributed $1,200 towards the cost of travel and materials.

Project two

The research was undertaken under contract to the Department of Education, who provided a grant of $7,933 for fieldwork and research assistance.

APPENDIX 2:
ADVISORY COMMITTEES FOR THE PROJECTS

Project One

Judy Gilbert, Senior Teacher, Auckland Kindergarten Association
Joy Ramsay, Senior Teacher, Auckland Kindergarten Association
Kay Hawke, Auckland Kindergarten Association
Jan Lovett, Auckland KTA, Head Teacher, Myers Kindergarten
Mary Smith, Head Teacher, Marlborough Kindergarten, Glenfield
Lucia Aiavoa, DOECE, Auckland
June Kean, Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, Auckland Teachers College
Vehega Momotu, Parent, Ponsonby Kindergarten
Ruth Powles, Parent, Takapuna Kindergarten

Project Two

Hans Wagemaker	Department of Education
Val Burns	Department of Education
Elizabeth Beatson	New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union
Bernice Lindegren (replaced Elizabeth Beatson)	New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union
Jeannie McCafferty	New Zealand Free Kindergarten Association
Kenda Kittelty (replaced Jeannie McCafferty)	New Zealand Free Kindergarten Association
Margaret Freeman	Wellington Free Kindergarten Association
Lynne Bruce (replaced Margaret Freeman)	Wellington Free Kindergarten Association

Initial Meeting Only:

Jill Milbank	Riley Kindergarten
Urmila Parnbu	Moira Gallagher Kindergarten
Vicki Feltham (parent)	Brooklyn Kindergarten
Sonia Harrison (parent)	Johnsonville Kindergarten
Mary Purdy	Wellington Teachers College
Miriam Smith	District Officer, Early Childhood

At this time of rapid educational change, relationships between parents and teachers in early childhood education are more important than ever before. *Keeping in Touch* focuses on kindergartens, but what it has to say is relevant to all forms of pre-school education.

Margery Renwick discusses the various contacts between teachers and parents—through teacher visits to a child's home, introductory group pre-entry sessions at kindergartens, parents helping at kindergartens—and looks at the support parents receive from teachers, and how they feel (often expressed in their own words) about the teachers' role in their own and their children's lives.

This thoroughly researched, accessible and sympathetic study will increase our understanding of the vital relationship between parents and teachers in kindergartens.

The Author

Margery Renwick is a Senior Research Officer in the Families and Early Childhood Programme of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. She has a special interest in the ways in which research can be disseminated to teachers and parents. One of her most popular texts, also published by NZCER, is *To School at Five*, a study of the transition from pre-school to school. She is currently working on a longitudinal study of teacher education.

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